

Oh, You Pretty Things by ManURonaldo

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Canon Compliant, Child Abuse, Homophobic Language, Hurt/Comfort, M/M, Slow Burn, redemption fic, up until the last half of the last episode of s3

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Joyce Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-07-07

Updated: 2021-06-14

Packaged: 2022-03-31 14:23:24

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 37

Words: 74,807

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Billy's made a lot of mistakes. He knows this. And, yeah, he thinks it would be pretty fair retribution if he just gave up and died now. But, apparently, Max isn't going to let that be an option.

1. Intro pt. 1

Author's Note:

WARNINGS: child abuse and homophobic language.

Season 3 spoilers!!

Billy knows, okay? He knows that it's not Max's fault that his dad hates him and he knows that it's not her fault that he hadn't actually been paying attention to where she was going. He knows that this is on him, not her. But he also knows that if he comes home without her, Neil will kill him. And even though Billy knows better, he can't help but feel, just a little bit, that if Max had used one fraction of her brain, she would have known that he would be the one to get screwed over if she went missing. So, yeah, he knows it's all his problem. Respect and responsibility and all that shit that he still can't get through his thick skull. It doesn't mean he's not a little worked up by the time he finally finds her. (And, Jesus, the things he has to do to find this girl. He's out here flirting with moms and driving through creepy woods to the middle of nowhere. Would it kill Max, just once, to be in a normal place?)

And when he finally finds her? In a house that belongs to a certified creep with some nerds that he had told her weren't worth her time and Steve Harrington, disgraced King and average basketball player? Well, then it goes up from a little worked up to downright pissed. It's not safe, for Christ sakes. That Byers guy took pictures of people who were having sex- who knew what the hell goes down in that house? And Lucas? Her crush? If Neil ever finds out she'd been close to him, they'll all be dead. No, no, this was the set up for a lot of bad stuff, all of it stuff that if Neil ever found out about, Billy'd pay the price. And of course she didn't think about that, because she's too busy trying to prove to these nerds that she's tough. Of course she's tough, she lives with Billy.

And then Steve Harrington walks out like Billy's just some kid he has to chase off the lawn, and Billy's had enough. One minute it's a normal fight, and then it's something much much more. And, yeah, a voice in his head is begging him to stop, and the voice in his head sounds a lot like his mom's and a lot like his, but there's another

voice that's screaming that he's a faggot and a pussy and if he lets them get away with this, there's nothing they won't try to get away with this. (That voice is decidedly not his mom's. He can't tell if it's his or not, though.)

So, yeah, it goes way, way too far, and he honestly forgets most of it because he's too busy listening to the all the screaming in his head. And then all of the sudden his ears are ringing and there's a bat between his legs and Max is demanding something, and his last lucid thought is that hey, she may not be blood, but Max definitely has some sort of Hargrove in her.

When he wakes up (after he lays on the floor for however long it takes Max's fucking drugs to get out of his system) and he's in his right mind he looks around and realizes that Max was in deeper shit than he thought because whatever this is, it's fucked up. There's drawings everywhere, the house is trashed, and when he goes to look in the fridge for any sort of drink there's a.....something in there. Max, he very well realizes, could be dead. And when he gets outside and realizes his car is gone, he decides that if she isn't dead, he's gonna kill her himself.

He goes home and waits for her. There's the usual screaming match with his dad- a couple of hits, a few kicks, a head slammed into a cabinet door- and then he goes and sits on his bed and waits. If she doesn't come back, he reasons, it's because she's dead. And if she's dead, he's dead too. (He realizes, with a small shock, that he doesn't really want her dead. He doesn't necessarily want to see her alive, not after that whole bat incident, but it'd been nice to see that she had some fire to her.)

Max returns at three in the morning, and when Neil walks in his room, he's still sitting upright on the edge of the bed.

"Do you want to tell me," Neil says in that voice, "why a cop just brought your sister and your car home?" And Billy can't even lie because he doesn't know.

Max has to hear it that night- they share a wall, for God's sakes. He keeps wanting to say that to Neil- "hey, she can hear, and she's not someone you want to mess with" - but it's too hard to talk with a mouthful of blood. Besides, he thinks, before he blacks out the second time that night, it isn't like she'd want to save him.

Max is different after that night. She's not scared of Billy, that's for sure. And Billy doesn't know if that's because of the bat or because of the thing he found in the fridge, but, either way, he can't blame her. It's hard to be scared of someone like him when you've seen monsters and own a bat full of nails.

Billy's different, too. He had used to think it was his job to protect Max- keep her away from the dangers of the world, keep her out of Neil's line of sight. Keep her safe, even if it meant terrorizing her a little. But now he knows that Max doesn't need him. She made it out of whatever hellhole that night contained alive- all while he was passed out on the floor. She's fine.

So Billy just stays away. Doesn't talk to her, doesn't scream at her, doesn't touch her. He gives her rides in silence and says "yes sir" when Neil tells him to babysit. He'd screwed it all up with Max, he realizes- he'd underestimated her. She wasn't some little girl. She had that fire- she could have been in this with him this whole time. They could have been equals. But he'd been too busy remembering himself at that age and being an asshole, and now they aren't equals at all. She has the upper hand. So Billy just leaves her alone. Tries not to get in her way. Tries not to think about that night where he realizes he was just like his dad.

And then, on Christmas morning, after he's watched her open all of her presents from Neil and he's once again been forced to say thank you to Susan a million times for the jacket she bought him, something changes again. Just a little bit. But still.

He's in his room, waiting. Christmas is bad for him and Neil- his mom had left around this time. A Christmas hasn't gone by in eight years where Neil didn't find some way to blame it all on Billy, and they're on Christmas break, so no one even has to worry about hiding bruises from teachers. His face is just a free for all. He used to try to avoid the Christmas fights, to run from them, but he knows now that they're inevitable. So he sits and he waits. The knock on the door surprises him- that's not like Neil. What surprises him even more, though, is the little red-haired face that peers in through the cracked door.

"Hey, Billy." Max says, and he tries to play it cool, like this isn't the first time they've interacted in months where neither Susan nor Neil

were around. “My friends are all having a Christmas party today, and I need a ride. Susan told me she’d give me one, but...” -she screws up her face here, like she’s reconsidering all of her life choices, and Billy’s heart is actually palpitating- “well, I told Neil that I want you to give me a ride. So that no one else has to bother. But it’s kind of far away- remember the Byers house?” And the question is literally the closest they’ve ever come to acknowledging that night. He realizes she actually wants an answer, so he nods. She nods back. “So I need a ride there, but there won’t be enough time for you to go home and come back again, so I told Neil you’ll probably just need to wait for me. We’ll be gone all day.” She tilts her chin defiantly. “Don’t be a little bitch about it, either.”

Billy’s heart is literally in his throat. This is the olive branch to end all olive branches. This is.... this is actually the nicest thing Max has ever done for him. It might actually be the nicest thing anyone has done for him since California. He clears his throat. “Listen, I’ll drive you, but when I say it’s time to go, you had better have your ass in the car, you hear me?” She flips him off.

Billy spends his Christmas sitting in his car alone at a house where his step sister almost castrated him and it is, honestly, the best Christmas he’s had in years.

2. Intro Pt. 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Warning: mentioned child abuse.

Season 3 Spoilers!!!!

After this, I'll start with the actual storyline. I just wanted to set up Billy's mindset in season 2 & 3, and try to explain why he and Max seemed to be on better terms in season 3.

Billy's not going to pretend that he and Max are friends or anything now. But they're not enemies, and they're not locked in a Cold War anymore, so that's something.

He still annoys her, yeah. Still plays music as loud as he can and drives as fast as his car will go and still rolls his eyes at her behind Neil and Susan's back. But he doesn't tell her what to do anymore and he doesn't scream and he tries -he really tries- to remember that she and him aren't as different as he used to think.

And, for the most part, it goes pretty well.

She treats him different, too: she annoys him on purpose now, does things that she knows will make him roll his eyes mostly because she knows that she can get away with it. She calls him a bitch and flips him off and makes gagging sounds when he talks to girls but she kind of laughs when she does it, and she doesn't wince when he walks in a room anymore.

They even watch TV together sometimes, and they sit on the same couch. And they'll eat meals together, even when Neil and Susan aren't home. And sometimes, on very rare occasions, out of the corner of his eye, Billy will catch Max silently singing along to the songs he plays in his car. (She always glares at him, though, if she thinks that he notices, and slams the radio off as fast as she can).

They don't talk about that night, of course, and they don't talk about

Neil. But she's more aware now- he can see how her eyes track Neil's every movement when he's in a room with Billy, how she flinches when Neil raises his voice, too. And sometimes, after bad nights, the door will open and she'll be standing there with a bowl of water, towels, and bandaids that she'll leave at the foot of his bed without saying a word. (After a couple of months, she starts bringing antiseptic, too, but Billy's positive they didn't own that before, and he realizes that she must have bought it, or stole it, or something, just for him. He can't even make eye contact with her for days after this realization.)

Things are, he thinks, better than they've ever been before.

And when summer rolls around? Well, that's the highlight of the year. Hawkins has always been too cold, but now the sun comes out and if he closes his eyes it feels -just a tiny bit- like he could still be in California. And that...well, that's the best feeling there is.

Max is gone all day long every day, and, as a result, Neil is off his back a little more. Billy uses this time to get a job that lets him stay in the sun as much as possible, and every day women flock just to flirt with him. Life is really, really good.

He can't believe it when Mrs. Wheeler- Karen- actually takes him up on his offer. He can't stop from laughing every time he thinks about it. He had expected her to turn red and start stuttering, not to actually...well. It just proves it. This summer is going to be really, really good.

And then, of course, it's worse than it's ever been before.

Billy deserves this, he's pretty sure. He was chosen. He was chosen because the Thing knew what he was- knew that he was like his dad, knew that he was wrong, knew that he was...unnatural. The Thing knew, and it picked Billy, and he was too weak to even stop it.

He managed to stop it from getting Mrs. Wheeler, but not anyone else. And when Max showed up at Heather's house... well, one voice in his head, It's voice, was screaming about the girl. But his voice, the

one he couldn't use, was screaming at Max. RUN, he was thinking, RUN NOW BEFORE IT DECIDES IT WANTS YOU TOO. But it didn't want Max, thank God. Probably because she wasn't a monster.

And then she tried to save him, which was just... of course. He wanted her to believe him, wanted her to know he was sorry, even as It curled his fingers around a shard and forced his hand into a swinging fist. He didn't want to hurt Max. Not now. But the thing didn't care.

Steve Harrington is the thing that stops him from killing Nancy and a car full of children, because of course Steve is wrapped up in this, too. Of course, Billy's long gone by the time Steve shows up. He's given up the idea of ever gaining control back. He belongs to It now. No point in fighting it.

But then, at the end, the girl... she saw. She knows. And she thinks that he's good. Or that he was good. She doesn't think he's lost. Not all the way. And Max is in the background, still screaming, and this monster... after it kills the girl, it's going to kill Max. And Billy's made too many mistakes with Max to let that happen. So he stands up, his legs shaking, and he hears, loud and clear, his dad's voice, taunting him. "Yeah, that's right, run away like you always do."

And so he does. He picks up the girl, and he runs. He runs and runs and runs, the thing chasing him, and he runs away from Max, so It won't get too close to her, and he can hear It right behind him, and the girl is crying, and Max is screaming, and then he feels a horrible stab in his shoulder and he's being lifted, still holding the girl, and, Jesus, the thing is about to eat both of them, and Steve Harrington is there, he can see him, and Steve's screaming, too, and he's about to die, and the girl's about to die, and he closes his eyes and thinks about his mom, on the beach, in a long white dress and seven foot waves.

The monster screams, but it's different this time, and Billy feels a searing hot pain in his brain, and the monster is dropping him, but Billy barely notices because the monster is screaming inside his head, too, and he can feel the screams and hear them and everything hurts and everything is awful and then it's all over.

He must have passed out, he realizes, because when he opens his eyes, Max is literally on top of him, crying and screaming.

“Wake up, Billy! Wake up! You have to!!”

He’s never seen her like this before. He can tell -can feel, in his mind- that the Thing is gone and dead.

“Maxine,” he whispers, his voice raw, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” And then he closes his eyes, ready to give in to the pain in his shoulder and the crushing guilt that’s rushing over him now.

And then the little bitch slaps him. “Stay awake, Billy,” she orders him, and he’s reminded of the bat. “You have to stay awake. You can’t die now.”

And, well, that settles it.

3. Wake up, you sleepyhead

Notes for the Chapter:

Again, season 3 spoilers!!

This chapter is a little different- one, because it actually takes place after the show, and two, because it's very Steve-centric. I'm going to get back to Billy very, very soon, but wanted to go ahead and introduce Steve. Max and Billy's relationship is really one of the big driving forces of this fic, though, so I'll be getting back to that soon.

On another note, thanks for all the positive feedback! I've literally never written fanfic before so it's been super encouraging!

The nice thing about this time around, Steve thinks -and, yes, he knows it's horrible to think anything about this situation is nice, not when people are dead and a literal 30 foot monster was involved- is that he doesn't have to process it alone. And, yes, he had Dustin last time, but it was different. Because last time (and, God, this was so embarrassing) he wasn't just processing a monster- he was also dealing with having his heart fucking ripped out and shredded, and Dustin wasn't much help with that. So, for the most part, he had been alone. (And, yes, Nancy had wanted to talk to him about the monsters, to see if he was okay, but he couldn't even really look her in the eyes then).

This time, though, he has Robin. Which is, honestly, incredible. Having Robin as a best friend is, in some ways, better than having Nancy as a girlfriend. Nancy, he now realizes, had truly believed that he was stupid and emotionally stunted and had just accepted it. (To be fair, he had accepted these things a long time ago). Robin, though, for whatever reason, is under the impression that he just lets himself be stupid and stunted and that he could, actually, be a lot more.

So Robin pushes him. She doesn't let him pretend he wasn't scared, she doesn't let him act like he doesn't have a lot of theories about

what exactly the Russians were doing with the Upside Down. She forces him -literally forces him- to talk about what he was thinking about when the Russians were interrogating him (embarrassingly enough, he had been trying to time out how long it was until Dustin should be above ground again. And he had been thinking about Robin, and if they were hurting her or not. And he had even thought, just a little bit, about his mom). He feels, for the first time, like he isn't shoving all of the monster stuff into a tiny corner of his brain. He's actually thinking about it.

The downside of having Robin to go through it with, of course, is that Robin has questions. Hundreds of questions. Thousands of em. Questions that he, in the last three years, has never even thought to ask.

So that's how they ended up here, for the third time in the two weeks since the mall attack, at Steve's house, sitting in the living room with all the brats scattered around them. (All the brats minus El and Mike, that is. El hasn't left the Byers house since the attack, and Mike spends most of his time consoling her. Steve can't imagine- every time he thinks about Hopper, his throat constricts, and he barely even knew the man).

"Okay, so the flickering lights mean-"

"Presence in the Upside Down. We think."

"We've never really tested it."

"Well, I mean, Will pretty much-"

"Yeah, but it's not like it was consistent! Ergo, we've never tested it."

All of the nerds basically trip over themselves to answer Robin's questions, each answer escalating to a shout before it's over. Robin, for her part, just nods like she's actually getting all of this. Hell, Steve thinks, she probably is.

"Okay and the demodogs are just baby Demogorgons?"

"Yeah, we think."

“Are they birthed? Or hatched?”

“Unsure.”

“I spit Dart out.”

“Demogorgon isn’t, like, the scientific name.” Steve feels the need to interject. “It’s a—”

Robin cuts him off with one of the most condescending looks he’s ever seen.

“I know what a Demogorgon is.”

All of the boys look at her like she’s Mother Mary incarnate, and Steve just gives up.

“Which, in a way, is way more embarrassing for you than it is for me.” He retorts, but she’s not even listening. She’s too busy asking about if the demodogs have humanoid characteristics.

The boys seem genuinely thrilled to answer all of these questions, and Steve realizes that, to them, even though they’ve almost died way too many times, there is a part of this that is still utterly fascinating to them. They have all this knowledge that almost no one in the world does, and they’re never allowed to talk about. Robin’s their dream. (She stays away from questions about the Mind Flayer, though, at least when Will’s around. That one’s a little too fresh and a little too awful to poke and prod with him in the room yet.)

Max, though, is uncharacteristically silent for many of these meetings. It can’t be that she doesn’t have opinions- Steve has seen her around these boys enough to know that she can and will hold her own in a screaming match. And she’s smart, too, so it’s not that she’s like Steve, who feels like anything he theorizes will automatically be proven wrong. It’s almost like...well, it’s almost like she’s in a whole different world while they’re talking. She’s physically with them, yes, but she just stares into the distance for most of it, furrowing her brow and frowning. She even passes up more than one opportunity to absolutely roast Dustin alive for saying something even Steve knows is absurdly stupid. (For example, at one point, Dustin posits that, maybe, Dart sought him out on purpose because the Demogorgon had

been impressed by his fighting spirit in the first attack).

He asks Lucas about it, when they're alone in the kitchen, trying to see if she's okay, but Lucas just stares at him. "Me and Max aren't like you and Nancy or Mike and El," he says, the tone of his voice making it clear what exactly he thought about couples like that. "We don't tell each other every thought that pops into our heads. And she's fine. I mean, her evil stepbrother was just possessed by an even more evil monster, and he almost killed us, like, a hundred times, so there's that shit. But she's fine."

"Has she said anything about Billy?" Steve asks, but Lucas shakes his head.

"Just that he's leaving her alone."

There had been a period of Steve's life when he found it almost impossible to stop thinking about Billy. Every night, before bed, he wondered what would have happened if Billy had killed him. (He'd be dead, obviously, he knew that, but he wondered how people would've reacted. He wondered how Nancy would've reacted.) In the hallways, at school, when he saw Billy coming, he looked the other way. Every time he talked to a girl who wasn't Nancy, he heard Billy's voice in his head. "Plenty of bitches in the sea." When his mind wandered in his class, he would find himself thinking about the fact that he'd almost died twice in one night, and that one of the causes was literally sitting in the same classroom as him.

Billy left him alone, though. Literally never even looked sideways at him after the night he almost bashed in his skull. And, over time, Billy just sort of faded from Steve's mind. Other stuff became more important- getting into college, not getting into college, finding a job, slinging ice cream. Steve just stopped thinking about him.

It had probably been months since the last time Steve had thought about Billy Hargrove when Steve crashes into the Camaro. And, at first, he literally doesn't even think twice about the fact that Billy's there. Of course Billy is somehow there. He has a knack for showing up on the worst nights of their lives. Steve is so unsurprised to see Billy trying to kill Nancy, actually, that he initially doesn't even realize that Billy is a part of this. He assumes that, like last time, Billy

had just shown up with a blood lust when they all really had much bigger things to deal with.

It doesn't take long, though, for him to realize that he was very, very wrong. Billy's more than involved in the situation. Billy is the situation.

And then Billy, who had just minutes ago tried to kill all of them, is some sort of goddamn hero. And then Billy's almost dead, and then it's all over again, just as quickly as it had all started. (The others, Steve eventually learns, had had more of a heads up than the Scoop Troop that the Mind Flayer was back. For him and Dustin, though, there was no warning at all, just a thirty foot monster made out of human goop.)

And now, for the second time in his life, Steve finds himself unable to stop thinking about Billy Hargrove. He just keeps thinking about how lost and quiet Will was for months after the Gate was closed, about how fragile he had seemed. And he keeps trying to imagine Billy even remotely resembling that. Steve doesn't think he'll every forget the look on Billy's face when the Mind Flayer was about to devour him—how terrified he looked, how he had closed his eyes like he was ready. He can't forget the way Max screamed over Billy's body, either, in those moments where they all thought he was dead and it was, genuinely, one of the worst sounds Steve had ever heard in his life. And he keeps thinking about himself, too, last October, when he felt like he had to deal with this all alone and there was no one to talk to and everything hurt (and he had only been dumped and almost killed, not possessed, too).

And, yeah, the guy almost killed him, but after everything that he saw at Starcourt, that's hardly the first thing Steve thinks about when he thinks about Billy Hargrove. And so, after talking to Lucas in the kitchen and listening to Robin ask another dozen questions that are so nerdy it's almost cringeworthy, Steve finds himself saying, almost without meaning to, "hey, Max, how's Billy?"

And Max absolutely freezes.

4. Put On Some Clothes, Shake Off Your Bed

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child abuse.

Again, thanks for the feedback!! I'm hoping that later I'll have the time to reply to individual comments, but right now just know that I really appreciate it!

For as long as she's known him, the question "how's Billy?" has never actually meant "how's Billy?" That was one of the first things Max learned about living with Billy Hargrove.

In the beginning, when her mom asks "how's Billy?" what she means is: "how's our new family? Are you okay? Are you going to forgive me yet?" And Max always says "he's fine," because she doesn't want her mom to cry again.

When the girls at school suddenly all want to be her friend and they ask her "how's Billy?" what they mean is: "is being your friend going to pay off? Is it worth being friends with you to see your stepbrother?" And Max always says "he's fine," because she knows it's boring.

When Neil asks her "how's Billy?" what he means is: "what has Billy done wrong today?" And Max, one time, in the beginning, said "he's being an asshole." After that, though, she always just says "he's fine," because she may hate Billy, but she hates the way he looks at her, scared and betrayed, even more.

When her new friends ask her "how's Billy?" what they mean is: "are you safe?" And Max always says "he's fine," because she's not scared of him, not anymore. Not after she swung a bat at him and not after she listened to his dad beat the shit out of him the same night.

When Steve asks "how's Billy?" though, with no inflection and no bitterness, she doesn't know what he means. What she knows, though, is that she can't tell him the truth, because she's afraid everyone else in the room will say "good," and she can't take having

to fight for Billy right now. So she just nods and says “he’s fine,” because that’s what she always says. And Steve looks a little disappointed, and she wonders if he’s disappointed because Billy’s fine or because he can tell that she’s lying.

xxx

Neil isn’t happy about the wrecked Camaro. He isn’t happy about the hospital bills, either. He also isn’t happy that both of his children had been at a mall involved in some huge scandal when they were supposed to be at the 4th of July celebration. And he most definitely isn’t happy with the explanation that Billy and Max give him.

They both tell him exactly what they’re supposed to, of course. Before Billy leaves the hospital, everyone is prepped extensively by men in suits about exactly what to tell people about their involvement. It’s a good story, too, about an electrical fire and falling beams and brothers who were just trying to look out for their sisters and kids who were at the mall because they had been promised free ice cream and ice cream workers who were trying to celebrate Independence Day with their friends. None of it matters, though. Billy knows that even as he’s being quizzed and drilled and signing papers pledging him to secrecy. Because Neil always -always, always, every time, no matter what- knows when Billy is lying to him. Without exception.

And when Billy and Max walk out the hospital doors, and they see Neil standing there talking to men in suits, his eyes locked on Billy’s face, Billy just turns to Max with his best shit eating grin.

“Told you, Maxine,” he says in the singsong voice he used to use when he was about to do something like try to run her friends over. “You shoulda just let me die.”

Max, however, just refuses to accept that Billy dying wouldn’t actually be that bad of an end to Billy’s story, at least not in his mind. She seems to think, for some reason, that the world will be better if he stays alive for right now.

And so, for the first week that they’re home, Max refuses to leave Billy’s side. At first, he thinks it’s because she’s still a little scared. And he can see it, too- she’s jumpy at little noises, she hugs her mom

way more than she used to. Every night, she tells every single one of her little nerds goodnight before she can sleep. (Of course, she says things like “hey, Mike, shut the fuck up so I can go to sleep,” and “goodnight shitheads,” but her face is a lot more revealing than her voice). Max, Billy guesses, is just staying close to him because he’s the only participant of that night that she can be in close proximity to 24/7.

Billy is wrong, though. He realizes this after a few days. Yeah, she may be sticking close to him because she’s still shell-shocked, but there’s more to it than that. She’s trying to save him. She’s trying to save him from Neil.

It’s this weird thing their family does- pretending no one knows about the relationship between Billy and Neil, when, obviously, everyone knows. Susan’s watched Neil hit him before, for Christ’s sakes. He shares a bedroom wall with Max. It’s a whole thing, though. Neil may know that Max damn well knows that he beats his son, but he never hits Billy in front of her, because it would too permanently shatter the illusion. Hell, even Billy and Max have never talked about it, even if she’s bringing him bandaids and he’s bleeding on his floor. It’s just how it works. And Billy has always hated this about the Hargrove/Mayfield family, because it’s always reminded him that no one can never know the truth, ever, even if they already do.

Now, though, Max isn’t using it to keep Billy trapped. She’s using it to protect him, and that- well, that’s never been done before. It’s not gonna work, though. Like, yeah, it’s working in the short term sense, and Neil hasn’t even touched him since he got home. But, long term, it’s gonna backfire. Billy can see it. He knows his dad better than Max does, and he knows that Neil isn’t cooling down- he’s working up. And when he finally gets his hands on Billy? Well, he’s had a lot more time to think about just how angry he is.

Billy tries to explain this, on the eighth day. He hasn’t been able to talk much since that night at Starcourt. Just can’t find any words worth saying. And Max, who has never had problems with silences before, now can’t bear more than a second of quiet. For days now, every waking moment has been filled with the sound of Max’s voice. He’s not annoyed, though, because it gives him something to focus

on. Because in those few seconds of silence, the places his mind goes when he doesn't have anything to focus on? Well... Max should've just let him die.

Now, though, he finally speaks, cutting her off in the middle of an hour long explanation about how to do a certain skateboard trick.

"Max." His voice sounds tougher than he remembers it, and she stares at him with wide eyes like he's a ghost. "You're gonna have to leave me, at some point."

Her face -which has always been way, way too expressive, like, goddamn, Maxine, not everyone needs to know every emotion you feel as you feel it- first looks scared, then upset, and then angry. She answers with resolve.

"No, Billy, Neil will."

He cuts her off, because he doesn't want to hear her finish the sentence. "Max, listen to me. I know Neil. I've been doing this for awhile. And I- listen. It's not like you can stay in the same room as me for the rest of our lives. And it's usually a lot better in small bursts than one big moment. And right now? We're building up to one helluva big moment."

Her whole face crumbles, and she looks so guilty, and that's not what Billy wanted, so he sighs and says the first thing that comes to his mind. "Max, I killed a lot of people. You don't need to feel bad for me."

She looks away from him, and says in the most neutral tone he's ever heard from her: "Yeah. I know. But you saved my best friend."

Max listens and leaves, eventually. Goes to Harrington's house, of all places. And Neil is ready.

And when Neil finally lets him know how he feels? Well, a lot has happened in the last two weeks. And when Neil tells him he's more trouble than he's worth, Billy's not gonna pretend that he doesn't agree. And Billy's not gonna pretend that Neil's fists don't feel a little

bit like atonement.

xxx

When Steve asks “how’s Billy?” he means: “how’s Billy?”

And when Max says “he’s fine,” she means: “he hasn’t left his room in five days and I think he might be dead.”

5. Put Another Log On the Fire for Me

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced child abuse and suicidal thoughts

Okay I swear Steve and Billy are actually going to interact soon

Max is clearly... lying? Not telling the whole truth? Being intentionally vague? Well, maybe it's not clear what Max is doing, but she's not being very forthcoming, that's for damn sure. Three times now, Steve has asked her about Billy. Three times now, Max has looked alarmed and said "he's fine" and then abruptly looked away.

The first time Steve asks her, it isn't a very thought out question. (Not many of his questions are). The second time he asks, it's because he's hoping that it won't catch her off guard as much and that, as a result, she'll give him a real answer. The third time he asks her, it's because he's getting worried that her evasiveness means that the answer is really, really bad.

After the third, slightly more aggressive "he's fine," Robin turns to Steve with raised eyebrows and suggests, in a voice that is somehow both sticky sweet and vaguely threatening, that maybe he can lay off the Billy question now. Steve sits back and sulks a little bit for the next thirty minutes, until it's almost dinnertime and he has to force the kids out because they all told their moms they'd be home twenty minutes ago.

"There's something Max isn't telling us," he says as soon as the front door has shut, and Robin just snorts.

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock."

"Then why didn't you let me-"

"If Max had wanted to talk about it, she would have, Steve." Robin

says, packing her notebook up. (She takes notes on this stuff. God, she is such a nerd that it makes Steve physically ache sometimes). “You don’t need to give her the third degree because she doesn’t want to talk about her brother who, quick reminder, has almost killed you. More than once.”

Steve just stares at her, his mind looking for another option. “But if Billy-“

“Billy’s not your business, Steve. Not if he’s not under mind control anymore.”

Steve works his jaw for a second. “Maybe if I ask her when-“

“No.”

“But what if-“

“Dude, no.”

Steve cracks a grin at her. “If we gave her the stuff the Russians gave us-“

“What the fuck?” Robin says immediately, but she’s smiling now. “Why does this matter so much to you, anyways?”

Steve shrugs, hopping on to his kitchen counter. “I just want to make sure everyone’s okay.” He’s working on being honest, so he tells a big part of the truth, leaving out the smaller part where he has dreams about Billy being eaten by the Mind Flayer. “I’ve seen everyone but Billy since that night. And this stuff... it sort of fucks you up.”

Robin’s face goes soft. “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock,” she repeats quietly, looking at him with a tilted head. “I really have to go, because I now have a dinnertime curfew, because my parents now think that I’m the kind of person who would try to break into a mall, but. Are you gonna be good?”

Steve gives her a thumbs up and his best heartthrob smile -the one that used to make girls in the hallway blush- and she grins back.

“You’re such a loser.”

“And you’re a nerd!” He yells at her retreating form, the smile staying on his face until he hears the door shut.

Having parents who are both fairly important people used to be a pretty sweet setup for Steve. They both work late hours, and they’re almost always traveling for work and going to conferences and galas and events on the weekends. Steve’s had free reign for his whole life, and he’s made good use of it.

Now, though, with no girlfriend and no job and no friends left from high school, it gets kind of lonely, a condition amplified by the fact that he’s now the kind of person who gets nervous around flickering lights and loud dogs.

He’s gotten into the habit of wandering through his house when he’s alone, counting his steps and making lists as he walks. The lists are a leftover habit from when he was a kid- he would say “Mom, I’m bored,” and she would make him sit down and write a list of literally whatever she could think of. Lists of colors. Lists of all the tall people he knew. Lists of green foods. She hasn’t made him write a list since he was eleven, but it’s a habit now, in moments of intense boredom, to start listing.

He’s halfway through the list “Things I Would Have Done With My Scoops Ahoy Uniform Had They Not Rudely Demanded I Turn It In After The Government Claimed I Broke Into A Mall To Give Out Free Ice Cream” (#5: saved it for Halloween and then made Dustin wear it, bloodstains and all) when the phone rings and he nearly jumps out of his skin.

It’s Max.

“What did you mean when you asked how’s Billy?” she says without preamble, her voice low and intense.

Steve scratches his head. “Just, uh, you know. I wanted to know if he was okay.”

“Why?”

"Because, um, I don't- I don't really know."

There's a long silence on the other end, and, for a second he thinks she's hung up on him.

Then, though, in a near whisper, she says: "I need your help with something."

xxx

Billy has his reasons for shoving a chair up under his doorknob, and those reasons are twofold.

One, it keeps Neil out. Billy is all about not enraging Neil further, obviously, but right now he doesn't think he could survive another hit, and Max told him he wasn't allowed to die yet. So.

Two, it keeps Max out. She doesn't need to see his face right now. Or his body. Or his room. Any of it, really.

The third reason -which Billy doesn't count as a reason because it's really more of a result than a cause- is that ever since he shoved the chair underneath his door, he hasn't been able to get out of bed. Maybe, physically, he could. He hasn't tested it. He doesn't want to, though, so he doesn't know. He's staying alive because Maxine told him to- surely that's enough, he thinks.

Max, apparently, doesn't think it's enough, because she bangs on his door every time their parents are out of the house. Her tactics change- sometimes she yells, sometimes she demands, sometimes she pleads, one time she cries. And it's not like Billy wants her to be miserable because of him. But he's not getting out of bed. Not yet. It's just not happening. He gets up to piss in the middle of the night and he drinks the glasses of water that Max leaves beside his door, but that's it. He can't be expected to do more.

(There's a voice in his head that sounds like his mom's that tells him he has to get up soon or he'll die anyways, but the voice that sounds like his dad's and that sounds a little bit like his reminds him that that's probably for the best).

And then, one night -Billy's really not sure how long he's been in

here- after he hears Neil's car drive away, there's no pounding on the door from Max.

Good for her, he thinks, even as his stomach grows heavier. She's getting the bigger picture here. Maybe, he thinks, they've finally counted up how many people went missing or died in the first week of July. Maybe Max is finally understanding that Billy did a lot more damage than attack her friends a few times. Or, maybe, she's remembering what it felt like to have Billy slam her head into a wall when she was still trying to save him.

Maybe she's understanding he can't be saved.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. Now, maybe, he can go.

The sound of his window opening is immediately followed by a crashing noise and a whispered "shitshitshit" and an even louder "oh fuck."

When he opens his eyes, Max is sprawled on his floor, looking around her with a pale face.

"Max." He's trying to figure out how the hell she got up here and also how to keep her from seeing his face when another head pops up in the window.

"Little help here? Max?"

He'd know that hair and that voice anywhere. A nasty grin spreads on his face, because he may be ready to die, but old habits die hard.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't King Steve himself."

6. I've Made Some Breakfast and Coffee

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child abuse

Ok just know that if you've commented on this story at all I've reread your comment probably a 1000 times. Seriously so grateful.

Max is looking at him like he's some mangled puppy on the side of the road, her eyes wide and horrified, and she's clearly trying to say something but can't get the words out. Billy can't look at her right now. He just can't. And so he looks, instead, at Steve Fucking Harrington, who is still trying to crawl through his window.

xxx

Steve wonders if he's made a mistake as soon as he hears the words "King Steve." He had let Max convince him that this was a good plan, mostly because he was worried and she sounded desperate, but now, as he's struggling through Billy's window (because Max, who had just literally crawled up his body to get in, is sitting frozen on the floor), he's wondering if maybe staying home was the better option. Because, what, he's out here like an idiot on a stepladder, risking dignity and probably a broken tailbone for a guy who he's not friends with? And that guy is, what, taunting him? Yeah, this is a load of bullshit. As soon as he gets in this fucking house, he's going to-

His inner rant is cut off as soon as he tumbles into the room. "Shit," he whispers, and Max turns back to face him, her eyes big and teary.

The room is absolutely destroyed- there's a dresser overturned in the middle of the floor, all the drawers pulled out and tossed around the room. There's music littering the floor, too, broken records and cassettes with the tape pulled out and a radio that looks like it was thrown across the room. The mattress isn't even on the bed anymore, and there's a broken mirror in the corner that- okay, yeah, that has blood on it. Steve swallows. Whatever he's a part of now, it's really bad.

"So did you two idiots have a reason for crawling through my window? Or were you just wanting to examine the decor?"

Finally, Steve looks at Billy, on the mattress on the floor, and...holy shit. Max crawls across the ground to kneel next to him, and he doesn't even look at her. His face is utterly destroyed, with what looks like a broken nose that blends in to a black eye and split lips and a cut in one eyebrow and another cut that has his hair matted with crusted blood. It all looks old and dry, and the color of his face is more purple now than tan. He's wearing a long sleeve shirt and Steve can't see his body, but if his face is any indication...this is really bad.

Billy laughs, staring over Max's head at Steve's face. "Come on, pretty boy. Penny for your thoughts?"

"Billy..." Max whispers, and Billy flinches. He's still staring at Steve. "You said you'd be okay."

"And I'm doing great."

Max's voice is wavering now. "I thought you were dead, you giant asshole."

He laughs. "You wish."

Max stands up quickly, turning to Steve and wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. "We need to take him to the hospital. Before Neil gets back."

"Not gonna happen, amigos," Billy says, working himself slowly to a sitting position. "No hospitals. You know the rules."

Steve feels sick to his stomach. Max is looking at him like he's gonna fix this, and Billy's looking at him like he's a joke, and Steve is pretty sure that he is the worst person in the world to be standing in this room.

"You need help, Billy." There's a grit in Max's voice. "Bandaids aren't going to fix this."

"Hey, listen, Maxine," -Billy really is such an ass, Steve thinks, and

then immediately feels guilty, because this is really bad- “if I go to a hospital, all the help in the world isn’t going to keep him from killing me.”

“Billy-“ Max starts, and, finally, Steve has a useful idea.

“I know where we can take him.” He looks at Billy now, tries to sound genuine and sincere. “No hospitals.”

Billy spits at his feet.

xxx

When Billy first got to Hawkins, he couldn’t do a single damn thing without first having to hear about how Steve Harrington had already done it, and, somehow, done it better. Everything- keg stands, basketball, girls- all the precedents around here were set by one man and one man only, and that man was Steve Harrington. It was annoying as hell, the way everyone talked about him like they would’ve lapped up the water he showered in, but what was even worse was that he didn’t seem to be active anymore. He had been domesticated, dating some priss, and yet, somehow, he was still king of the mountain. And he wasn’t even that good. There wasn’t a single record he set that Billy couldn’t beat. But people looked at Billy like he was a replacement -a filler, even, a placeholder- until Steve got back on his feet again.

It was infuriating.

Steve brought out something ugly in Billy, those first months here. Billy wanted -needed- everyone to understand that he wasn’t some watered down King Steve. He was Billy Hargrove, for fucks sake.

And then, you know, Billy almost killed him, and even he thought maybe it was time to back off a little. So he forgot all about Steve Harrington, tried to shove the memory of that night from his mind and forget the way it felt to break Harrington’s nose.

Now, though, Harrington has the audacity to climb through his window with his sister and look like a concerned mother and act like some sort of savior, and, well. Billy doesn’t have to stand for that.

Billy Hargrove is going to die in the backseat of Steve's car, and it's not going to be because of his injuries. No. It's going to be because Steve kills him, because that's how big of an asshole this guy is. He literally has not shut up since they managed to wrangle him into the Beamer, and every single word has been aimed at Steve.

"Hey, weren't you wearing a sailor uniform the last time I saw you? Come on, princess, where'd it go?"

Steve tries to look at Max, but she's staring out the window and sniffing.

"Tell the truth, was that really a mandated uniform? Or was it just sort of a kinky thing? With that girl? What's her name? Bluebird? Robert? Batman?"

"Don't talk about her." Steve says, and it's the first thing he's replied to. It was the wrong choice, apparently, because Billy laughs loudly, mean and sharp.

"Oh, I see how it is. Tell me, what kind of stuff were you two doing in those uniforms? I know you—"“

"SHUT UP!" Max turns and starts screaming so quickly that Steve jumps. She looks like she's about to crawl into the backseat, and Billy actually scrambles backwards a little bit, immediately wincing from the effort. "SHUT UP! Stop being such an...such an ASSHOLE! You're being a DICK, and you're doing it ON PURPOSE, and I thought you were DEAD! So just SHUT UP!"

Billy freezes for a second, and then his jaw juts out and his whole body tenses.

"HEY, MAXINE," he roars back, "WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME HERE? I'm not dead, am I? What, you want me to be sunshine and flowers now? Come on, MAX, WHAT DO YOU—"“

"SHUT UP!" Max hits a note Steve didn't know was possible. "SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP! SHUT—"“

Billy is still yelling and Max is absolutely shrieking now, and Steve is pretty sure that if he doesn't stop this, there's going to be not one but two dead bodies in his car. (Maybe three. Neither sibling seems very keen on containing their anger right now).

"Hey, you guys, I think we all just need to-"

Steve might as well be invisible.

"WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU-"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP! JUST STOP FUCKING TALKING! I-"

Max's eyes are probably seconds away from popping out of her skull, and what's left of Billy's face is so red it almost matches the bruises. Steve does the only thing he can think of- he slams on the brakes. Hard.

Max yelps, but, even worse, there's a small whimper from the backseat as Billy catches himself from falling, and, immediately, Steve feels like the biggest asshole in the world. They've both been stunned into silence, though, so there's no time to dwell on his guilt because Steve has a feeling they're both about to yell at him next.

"LISTEN." Steve says, trying his hardest to sound like someone with authority. He ends up, in his own ears, sounding like his seventh grade basketball coach, but, hell, he'll take what he can get. "Max!" He points at her, eyes still on the road. "You called me because you wanted my help because you were worried about Billy. You wanted to get him help. And Billy." He shifts his eyes to look at Billy in the backseat, who is now sprawled out and holding his ribcage. "You came with us. We didn't drag you out of there. You got up and walked." (Walking is a pretty liberal term for what Billy did, considering it involved half of his body weight on Steve and a very slow shuffle, but Steve feels like the point still stands). "Both of you"-he points between the two siblings now, and, god, he sees it, okay? He gets why Dustin says he's a mom- "chose to be here. This is our best possible choice for this situation, and you both know it, so start acting like it!"

They both stare at him in silence, and then, very quietly, turn to face

each other. There's no verbal communication there, but something definitely happens, because after a few moments, Max looks back at him.

"You," she says, her voice full of derision, "are soooo fucking bossy."

xxx

Joyce Byers doesn't really know what she expects when she receives a call from Steve Harrington saying quickly and quietly that he doesn't have time to explain but he's on his way and they need her help. (He hangs up before she can even find out who 'they' are). Her worst fear, of course, is that something else has happened with the gate and they're about to get thrown into all of this again only two weeks later. Doing it again? She doesn't know if she can. And without Hopper? God, it hurts to think about. She doesn't want to scare her kids as bad as she's scaring herself, so she doesn't tell Will or Jonathan or El about the call (or even Nancy, who is under the impression that Joyce doesn't know she's here). She just goes and sits on the porch with a cigarette and tries to prepare herself.

What she's definitely not prepared for, though, is for Steve to pull up with Max Mayfield and immediately start trying to drag Billy Hargrove out of his car.

She runs forward to help him and can see, up close, the way that Max's eyes are puffy and the damage on Billy's face. He visibly flinches whenever she or Steve touches him, and she does her best to be gentle getting him to the porch, but the boy is twice her size and even Steve is struggling to bear his weight.

The whole way, he's laughing. "Hey, Harrington," he says as he stumbles, "isn't this the house where I broke your nose?"

Steve looks exhausted and angry and worried all at once, and Max hovers at Joyce's side, clearly ready to try to catch Billy.

"What happened?" Joyce asks when Billy's finally to her porch and his breathing is a little too labored for him to keep laughing.

Steve looks at Max like she's the one who should answer, and Max

takes a deep breath, uncertainty on her face.

“He, um.” She starts, and Billy’s watching her with his one good eye.
“His-“

“His Papa.” Eleven’s voice comes from the open door. She nods at Joyce, voice confident. “His Papa is a bad man.”

Billy’s head snaps towards her, and, in the porch light, his face looks even worse than Joyce had originally thought. “Max,” he says in a low growl, staring at Eleven, “get her the fuck out of here.” And then he throws up on Joyce’s feet.

7. Look Out My Window

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced child abuse, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks

First off, big shout out to everyone who started reading this story because it was Steve/Billy and it's now 7 chapters in without a single interaction between just the two of them. I promise it's coming. It's just that every time I start writing, I feel a deep need to address Max and Billy before I can get super into Steve/Billy. When I say it's slow burn, I mean real slow.

Also, I know Billy is kind of all over the place emotionally in these last few chapters- I'm trying to stay true to the show, though, where it feels like his emotions only operate in extremes with little to no transition phases.

To everyone who's commented that the characters have been true to character- that's seriously one of the best compliments! I started this fic because Steve, Max, and Billy truly are my favorite characters, and I want to do them justice.

Big thanks to everyone who's read this far.

Max feels like time actually stops when Billy throws up on Ms. Byers. Everyone goes very quiet, and Billy freezes. Max has seen this look before on him, when he's pushed back too far with Neil or been clumsy and broken something he shouldn't have. It's not good. And when he looks up and faces Max... she's only seen that look on his face once before, and she knows that she needs to move fast.

And then, just as suddenly as it stopped, time starts going very quickly. Max is basically shoving El to her room, promising quietly that she'll explain everything in a minute, and then Ms. Byers and

Steve are pulling Billy in and laying him down on a couch, and his hands are starting to shake, which is REALLY bad, and then Will comes out, and she yells for him to go back to his room, NOW, and then Jonathan and Nancy come out and Nancy's shirt is on backwards, and Steve winces, and Billy's breathing weird, and Max yells at them, too, to GET OUT, and she asks Ms. Byers for a bucket, and then very quietly pleads for Steve and Ms. Byers to please, please, leave the room for one minute and just go get everything they need and to let them have one minute, really quick, PLEASE, and Steve hesitates, but Will's mom pulls him out of the room and says, in a whisper, "you have five minutes," and then, finally, it's just her and Billy.

Time is still going too fast and Billy starts dry heaving into the bucket.

xxx

Billy tries not to make a habit of breaking down in front of Max. Hell, they've only been even vaguely amicable for less than a year now- she's not exactly someone he wants to be a pathetic shitshow around.

It did happen once, though, back in California. He had been babysitting her, but she was too damn old to need a babysitter, and the weather had been perfect, so he had left her at the house with very clear instructions to not cause any problems while he went down to the beach to surf. When he got back, she had been standing in the middle of the living room, staring at a broken window. He's still not sure how it happened- something about trying to do a skateboard trick inside- but the second he saw it, he knew he was dead meat. At first, he was furious. He was gonna kill her. But when he opened his mouth to scream, he couldn't breathe. And then his body had just given up. It had been bad, and it had scared the shit out of Max. They never talked about it afterwards.

It happened again, in the sauna, when she was trying to save him. It was right before he tried to kill her and her friends.

Now, though, is a whole new level of humiliating. Because he didn't even throw up on Neil or Susan- he threw up on a tiny woman who even he can tell has no intention of hurting him. But, for a split

second, he had been waiting for someone to hit him, and now he can't get the image of Neil out of his head, and what he'll do when he finds out where Billy is and what he's done. They all know, now, and people aren't supposed to know. Billy's a dead man walking. And that girl? Seeing her? Billy just spent an entire week helping create a monster designed just to destroy her. He tried to kill her himself. If anyone gets to kill him, it should be her. And part of him is so, so sure that Neil is going to burst through the doors and kill him, and the other part of him wants to go kneel at the girl's feet and beg her to do it now and he can't BREATHE.

He's vaguely aware of being laid down on a couch, and of people coming and going and Max screaming like a hellion, but not much else. He's going to die, he thinks, he's going to die, in this living room, and what kind of fucking coward is he? Because an hour ago, in his room, he was ready to die and now he's there and he's fucking terrified but it's just because his heart won't stop beating so fucking hard and he's so fucking weak and there's a pounding noise in his head and Neil was right and he deserves this and he needs to just accept it but he can't because his lungs are filling up with saltwater and-

There's a voice, in the back. And it's not Neil's, and it's not his, and it's not his mom's. It's Max's. And, slowly, he starts hearing words.

xxx

"Billy." Max kneels in front of him, hands in her lap, and Billy's chest is literally heaving and it's like he's a million miles away. It's like seeing him Flayed again. She's crying, and she's cried more over Billy in the last three weeks than she has in the last five years and, honestly, she doesn't think she can take it much longer. "You need to listen to me. Your name is Billy Hargrove. You're my brother. My name is Max, but you call me Maxine sometimes, because you're kind of an ass. You're always kind of an ass, actually, but I kind of think we were about to be friends. Or something. One day. You're gonna be okay, but you need to breathe. I told you" -she starts full on sobbing, and her heart physically hurts, and it's hard to talk- "I told you that you couldn't die yet. Remember? And you stayed alive. And you're gonna keep doing that. And I know you're scared, but you don't need to be. Because I'm not gonna let you die. I promise, I'm not gonna let

you die. So please, please, listen to me. You need to breathe. My friends are gonna help you, but you have to calm down. Please don't be scared. Please. Please, Billy, I promise you, I-"

"Max." Billy whispers, and time suddenly goes back to normal. "Hey, Maxine. I'm fine, okay? So stop- stop your blubbering, Maxine, you're just embarrassing yourself. I'm fine."

"You are just such a dick," she whispers back, tears still coming. She grinds the heel of her palm into her eyes. "I hate you."

"Yeah, listen, the feeling's mutual."

Billy visibly swallows, looking up at the ceiling. "Go tell your friends they can come in again." He winces. "But not- not the girl, Max."

She nods quickly, running out the door before he can change his mind.

xxx

The Billy Hargrove that Steve comes back to is not the Billy Hargrove that he left. He's still angry, but it's a quiet, sullen anger now, and he's not yelling. He just looks...tired. He blinks up at Joyce, and he pays so little attention to Steve that Steve isn't sure Billy even knows he's in the room.

"Sorry about your shoes, ma'am," he says in a tight voice, and Joyce shakes her head.

"No, no, I have- I have two kids, I promise, sweetie, that's not the first time that's happened."

He doesn't react to that, just closes his eyes. Joyce kneels by the couch, gestures for Steve to come closer.

"Will you please let us help you now, Billy? You need...I think you really need help, sweetie."

Never in his life did Steve think he would hear anyone call Billy Hargrove sweetie with such kindness. Joyce is, truly, one of the most surprising people he knows.

Billy nods, eyes still closed. “First, you have to get Max home. If my dad- she needs to get home before Neil and Susan.”

Joyce and Steve exchange a look, and Joyce opens her mouth to say something, but Billy adds, quietly:

“She’s not- she’s safe in that house. No one will hurt her.”

“He’s right.” Max echoes from the doorway. “And I do- I need to be home first.”

“I’ll take you.” Steve volunteers, glad to be useful again and not staring at Billy like a dead fish.

Max, though, shakes her head. “No. You... will you stay here? With Billy?”

Bad idea, Steve thinks, and he wants desperately to say no. Whatever it is he brings out in Billy, it’s no good to anyone, but Max looks so desperate and so torn that he finds himself nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, I will.” These damn kids. It’s like he can’t say no to anything anymore.

Joyce stands. “I’ll go get Nancy to bring you home.” She exits the room softly, and Billy opens his eyes and looks at Max.

“Come on, Maxine,” he says, but the bite is gone. “What do you want from me?”

She stares back. “I don’t know. But right now, just- just stay alive. And don’t be an asshole.”

8. What Do I See

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: child abuse

Again, thanks to everyone who's read so far! I love writing this story and I'm glad some of you are enjoying it too.

Three times now, someone has tried to absolutely obliterate Steve's facial structure right before he's attacked by a monster. Two of those times, Joyce Byers has patched him up afterwards.

Steve remembers how kind she was and how gentle she was, and how she really did make him feel, after everything, that his black eyes and broken nose were just as important as anything the monsters had done that night.

That's what convinces Steve to take Billy to the Byers- that and the fact that Joyce is not the kind of person who a screaming Billy will intimidate. She's not scared of anything, Steve is pretty sure, not after watching her track down monsters and sneak into Russian bases.

Joyce, he hopes, will know what to do in a situation where he is clearly floundering.

And, of course, she does.

After Max leaves, the first thing Joyce does is hand Billy a handful of painkillers and a glass of water. She speaks to him in a quiet, soft voice, not asking any questions about what happened and saying, again, that she just wants to help him. Billy doesn't say anything back.

They have to cut his damn shirt off because Billy can't get his arms up high enough to take it off himself (the noise he makes in the back of his throat when he tries is so gut wrenching that Steve has to look away) and, when the shirt is off, Steve immediately wishes it wasn't.

Billy's whole torso is littered with bruises and cuts and dried blood

and, in a cluster above his waistband, a few round burn marks. Cigarettes, Steve thinks, before he's hit with a sudden round of nausea. Billy's shoulder is still covered with half healed marks that look purple in the light- evidence of when the Mind Flayer lifted him in the sky and almost ate him. Jesus, of course his shoulder wasn't even healed yet. Steve thought about being interrogated by the Russians, thought about what it would be like if it had happened while he still had a bum shoulder.

Shit.

Joyce doesn't say anything, though, just very quietly asks if his back is hurt, too.

Billy closes his eyes and moves, slowly, so that they can see his back, and Steve's stomach drops.

"Oh, sweetie." Joyce whispers, hand to her mouth. Steve feels a dozen urges at once- to go throw up, to punch a wall, to cry, to go drive to Billy's house and burn it down. To run out of the room and never look back.

Billy's back is nothing but welts punctuated by short, deep cuts and ugly, yellowing bruises. The welts cover the expanse of his back, one actually crawling up his neck and disappearing under his mess of tangled curls.

God.

Steve has never hated any moment like he hates right now- not when he first saw the Demogorgon, not when he stood in a tunnel full of demodogs, not when Nancy told him he was bullshit. All of those moments, as awful and hated as they were, were things he could actually do something about. This...this was something that had already been done. Nothing in the world could keep this moment from happening.

"It's not- I've had worse." Billy's voice is stiff and quiet, the first words he's said since Max left. "You don't need to feel bad."

"You've had worse?" Steve blurts out, and immediately hates himself

for it when Billy's ears turn red.

Joyce just stares at Billy, and Steve has no idea what she's thinking. She might cry, but she could also be about to yell.

She doesn't do either, though. Just touches Billy's hair so, so gently and whispers: "Let's get you cleaned up."

xxx

I almost killed your son, Billy wants to scream. I almost killed Steve. I attacked him in your house. I tried to kill my sister. I thought about running over your child with my car.

He wants to tell her to stop- stop, you don't understand what you're doing, you don't know who you're helping.

But he can't get any of the words out, because he's a fucking coward. He deserves for her to throw him out now that Max is gone- he deserves for Steve to finally say "listen, he's not worth it, I was only doing this for Max." He deserves it, and he knows that, okay? He knows it's wrong to let this woman sit here and clean his wounds and be so, so quiet with him, and it's wrong to let Steve Harrington, of all people, help her. He should scream and shout until they're sent running.

But he's a fucking coward, and so he doesn't. He doesn't want to see the hate on their faces that he knows should be there, doesn't want to hear them call him all the words he should be called. Doesn't want to see Max's face when she realizes she went to all of this for nothing. So he's just silent, and he lets it happen.

She cleans the cuts on his torso and back and carefully bandages them; she puts a cream on the bruises and welts; she wraps his ribs for him where he thinks his dad may have cracked one. Steve helps her, and Billy's not really sure what hands are whose on his back, just knows that they're being soft and kind and everything he doesn't deserve. She does his face last, carefully cleaning the blood out of his hair and even working out some of the tangles with her fingers. She packs medicine into the cut that hurts every time he moves his eyebrows and puts a bandaid on it, and, during it all, no one says a

word.

When everything is bandaged and covered, she very gently takes one of his hands in both of hers (and Jesus, this woman is tiny, Billy could break her hand without even really trying) and says, very quietly, “Billy, are you hungry?”

xxx

They’re in the kitchen warming up soup and Steve’s still considering throwing up when Joyce says, quietly enough that Billy won’t be able to hear her in the living room, “fucking bastard.”

“What?” Steve asks, rubbing his temple in a desperate attempt to stop feeling nauseous.

“If Hopper were here, we would’ve just shot him.” Joyce whispers, and, by God, the woman means it. “We would have shot the fucking bastard and made it look like an accident and no one would have ever looked into it because Hop was the goddamn chief of police. That fucking bas- I mean Jesus CHRIST, that man deserves to be in a hole in the ground. I- I can’t- shit. Shit.”

There are tears in her eyes now, and she’s stirring the reheated soup with such a vengeance that Steve wouldn’t be surprised if the spoon broke in half.

“I’ll kill him if he ever touches that boy again- I’ll kill him myself, Steve, I swear to God, I’ll kill him.”

She finally looks up at Steve, and he realizes that his mouth is hanging open.

Her face softens.

“Did you- did you know?” she asks. “About his dad?”

Steve shakes his head. “I didn’t know anything about Billy.” I still don’t, he wants to add, but talking after all that is harder than he had expected.

Joyce nods, blinks fast. “I should probably- I’m sure all the kids are wondering what the hell is going on. I’ll go talk to them. Will you

bring Billy this food? And stay with him? I'll be there in just a minute.”

Billy is in the exact same position they left him in, sitting on the couch, loosely clothed in one of Hopper's old flannels. He doesn't look at Steve when he walks in, just quietly accepts the bowl of soup in shaking hands.

Steve thinks about the Billy in the car, screaming and angry, and he almost misses him. That's the Billy he knows, not this one, quiet and embarrassed and broken.

He sits down next to Billy and Billy flinches. Steve suddenly feels so, so tired, and like he's still the least qualified person to be in this room.

He says what he's been thinking for the last hour. “I'm sorry I slammed on the brakes. In the car. You were hurt, and I- I wanted you and Max to stop fighting. I should've figured out a different way.”

Billy turns and stares at him, looking at him for the first time in hours, and his face shifts from the blank look he's had since taking off his shirt to a condescending snarl.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Billy mutters and then, slowly, begins to eat. “Why are you even still here? Just fucking go home, Harrington.”

Steve gives the truth. “Max asked me to stay.”

“Do you obey every order 12 year old girls give you?” Billy asks around a mouthful of food, and Steve responds automatically, without even really meaning to:

“She's fourteen.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Billy mumbles again. “Just stop- stop talking, Harrington.”

Finally, Steve thinks. Something he can actually do. And he closes his

eyes.

xxx

Steve Harrington is falling asleep on a couch next to Billy in the house where Billy almost killed him after what has been, easily, one of the most humiliating hours of Billy's life, and Billy's not even confused anymore. Steve is just doing what Max told him to do, and if there's one thing Billy understands, it's the need to do what Max tells you to.

Jesus, he thinks as he finishes the soup. Next thing he knows, he'll be as big a bitch as Harrington.

He should still leave this house. He knows that. They don't have any sort of plan for what to do when Neil realizes he's not home- no one even talked about it. If Neil finds out he's here, he'll be furious, and no one but Billy should have to deal with that. Billy should leave- honestly, Billy should leave before he gets kicked out, before all these people come to their senses and realize he's not the kind of person they should be helping.

But he feels better than he has in days, and the soup is good, and the flannel he's in is warm, and the voices in his head are calming down for the first time in awhile. So Billy looks at Harrington -who is actually snoring, like, dammit, was Hawkins really so starved for anyone decent that this loser was their heartthrob?- and realizes that, maybe, he's tired, too. And Billy lays his head back and closes his eyes and hopes that when he wakes up he won't still be too fucking scared to leave.

9. A Crack in the Sky

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced child abuse

I'm glad you guys are liking Joyce, because as soon as I introduced her to the story I realized she was going to be a lot more important than I had originally planned, so get ready to see a lot more of her!

Joyce feels lonelier tonight than she has in awhile. She's been so busy in the aftermath of Starcourt- moving El in, helping El grieve, making sure her sons feel safe again, making sure that all of Hopper's things aren't thrown away. She's had so much going on that it's been easier to forget why all of this is happening in the first place.

But tonight, she feels so, so alone, and she misses Hop. Because there needs to be another adult here. She can't do this alone. (She knows, technically, that Steve is an adult now, and Lord knows the boy is doing all he can. But he's not old enough for this—not old enough to have learned that not all bad men are Russian or dressed in lab coats and not everything awful comes from the Upside Down). She needs Hopper here- wants him to flash his badge and arrest the son of a bitch, wants him to beat the man to a pulp. Needs him to grieve with her about the things that are being done to children in their town while they have no idea.

But Hopper's gone, and Joyce is alone. And she had seen the look on Billy's face, and she knows what's coming. So she goes out onto the porch after everyone in the house is asleep (both Billy and Steve are slumped on the couch, and she really wants Billy in a more comfortable position, but doesn't want to risk waking him) and she lights a cigarette and she waits and she wishes, desperately, that Hopper was smoking one with her.

Sure enough, at 1:00 am, Billy comes stumbling through the front door. His arm is wrapped around his rib cage and he's panting, and he's leaning heavily on the wall. Joyce wonders, a fist gripping her

heart, how the hell he thought he would be able to get anywhere if he can barely walk out of the house. His jaw sets when he sees her sitting on the porch step, and he closes his eyes like he's steeling himself.

"Thank you for everything, ma'am." He says, and Joyce thinks about all the ways the kids used to describe Billy Hargrove -loud, angry, crazy, terrifying- and about what they would say if they heard the voice he uses when he talks to her. "I'll go ahead and get out of your hair now."

Hopper's shirt is too big on the boy, and his hair is still matted to one side of his face from sleep, and even with the broken nose and black eye he looks so, so young.

Joyce sighs. "You're not leaving, Billy."

His eyes open at that, and he actually looks surprised, the poor kid.

"No, you...you've done enough." He swallows. "Thank you, but I'll go home now."

Joyce would have laughed if the idea wasn't so heartbreakng. "If I have anything to do with it, you'll never go back there again." She means it, too, but the boy just looks at her like she's speaking Russian. "Besides, even if I did let you leave, we both know there's no way in hell you'd be able to even walk to the end of my driveway. So just go back to sleep, Billy."

She looks away from him then, mostly because he's clearly so embarrassed about barely being able to walk and she wants to let him regain his composure. In a minute, she thinks, she'll get up and help him to a bed where he can actually sleep. To her surprise, though, he slowly and stiffly takes a seat next to her.

He looks out at the tree line, takes a shuddering breath. "Don't suppose there's any way I could bum a smoke?"

She lights it for him, and he looks so grateful to have it that she can't even bring herself to feel guilty about giving a high schooler a cigarette.

When he's halfway through the cigarette he says, in a low voice, "I meant what I said. About Max. She's safe at home- he'll never even touch her."

"I know," Joyce says, and she really does. "I never would've let her go back if I didn't."

He nods. "So you don't- don't worry about it. You don't have to...Max is safe."

For a second, Joyce isn't sure where this is coming from, and then she actually feels her heart break.

"Billy," she whispers, very slowly laying a hand on his bicep. "I'm not helping because I'm worried about Max. I'm helping because I'm worried about you."

Billy's eyes close again at that, and for a moment he looks like he's going to open his mouth and yell. But he doesn't, just leans his forehead on his fist for a second and takes a long breath. "You don't know shit about me, lady."

Joyce smiles. "Probably not. But you don't know shit about me, either."

They finish their cigarettes in silence, and Joyce wishes that Hopper was sitting next to them.

xxx

Steve wakes up on a couch with a crick in his neck and a dire need for coffee.

Joyce, Will, and Eleven are already in the kitchen and, as soon as Steve walks in, Joyce pours him a cup of coffee.

"How do you take it?"

"Black."

She smiles, lets him get seated before she turns to the kids and literally says the word "shoo." It takes a few minutes for her to scoot

them both out, and Steve almost feels bad, because they're both clearly dying for more information, but, once they're gone, she takes a seat with Steve.

"Jonathan's at work already. I called in sick today," she explains. "Seemed like I should be here." She sighs, takes a sip of her coffee. "Billy tried to leave last night."

Steve's head snaps up at that. "What—"

She nods. "He didn't, of course. He's still asleep right now. But he did try."

Steve splutters. "What would be- where would he even go?"

Joyce smiles sadly at him. "Home."

"What the fuck?" Steve whispers. Dammit, Billy. "Why would he- we just got him out of there."

"These things, they're more.... they're more complicated than they seem, when you're in them." Joyce says with a shake of her head. "It's hard to imagine that you can have a way out. Billy's just...it's hard."

Steve thinks about how Jonathan never really talks about his dad and how, when he does, there's a general distaste in his tone. He wonders...and then stops himself, because he can barely handle Billy right now.

Joyce taps her fingers. "The thing is, Steve, I don't think Billy needs a hospital. But he needs a place where he can rest and heal and be safe, and he needs to trust us enough to let us give him that place."

Steve sighs. "How are we gonna do that?" He's still stuck on the idea of Billy trying to go back to a home where his dad had broken his nose.

"I don't know. Not yet." There's resolve in her voice. "But we're going to figure it out."

Billy isn't sure where he is when he wakes up- the room is dark and the bed isn't his and the house doesn't smell like home. He'd know that knock and that screech anywhere though.

"Billy! Let me in! BILLY!"

"Maxine!" He yells, not bothering to lift his head from the pillow. His whole body hurts, he notes, but it hurts less than usual. "Shut the fuck up!"

There's a pause, and then the pounding resumes louder and harder when, suddenly, the door swings open.

Max stares at it in surprise, her hand still raised to knock. "I guess it wasn't locked." She looks sheepish when she says it, and Billy rolls his eyes before closing them. "I biked here as soon as Mom and Neil went to work. I wouldn't have bothered if I knew you were going to be rude."

He feels Max's weight settle at his feet, and, holy shit, Max is getting real comfortable with him real fast, huh? Even at their best she never would've dared sit on his bed. Apparently this whole trying to save his life thing is a real game changer.

"How was last night?" she asked, suddenly hesitant considering she was trying to barge into his room five seconds ago.

He grunts in response. He can't believe he's still at this house. He can't believe he let Joyce tell him to stay.

"Neil still thinks you're at home. Cause, you know, Steve shoved the chair up under the door and closed the window when he left so it still seems the same. So. You don't have to worry. No one knows you left."

He opens his eyes at that. He hadn't known Steve had done all that before he crawled out the window- the whole process of getting out of the house is still a little hazy in his mind, because all he had been able to think about at the time were his ribs. That does buy him some time. But. Still. It won't be enough.

"Max," he says. "Neil's going to find out."

She shakes her head. “Not if we-“

“Hey, listen. He always finds out.” Her eyes go wide, but he keeps talking. “What’re we going to do when he does?”

Her mouth twitches. “I’m working on it.”

Billy can’t help it- he laughs. “Great, Maxine, that’s fucking great.”

She rolls her eyes. “Hey, I got us this far, didn’t I?”

“This wasn’t even your plan, this was Harrington’s-“

“That I set in motion!” Billy loves it when Max gets irritated. She starts speaking with a growl noise and her eyes, he’s pretty sure, actually grow two sizes bigger. She looks at his grin and grumbles a little bit. “By the way, I feel like I should warn you- Eleven lives here now.”

“Eleven?” The girl, his mind supplies, and his grin disappears. “I don’t wanna see her, Max.”

Max shrugs. “I know. I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

Billy closes his eyes again. This is just fucking great. “Is Harrington still here?”

“Yeah. He’s drinking coffee with Ms. Byers.”

Huh. Billy hadn’t been expecting that. Harrington, he assumed, would’ve gone home to his mansion as soon as he was done playing savior for the night. Maybe he’s still waiting for Max to release him.

“Tell him he can go home.”

Max snorts. “I did.” When Billy looks at her, she’s smirking. “He said he’d rather stay.”

10. And a Hand Reaching Down to Me

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced child abuse

Seriously, thank you guys so much for reading! I didn't really have any expectations when I started this fic so the fact that some people are actually liking it is incredible. Thanks again!

Billy knows that it's illogical to want to avoid the girl this badly. He knows, okay? He knows that there's a lot going on right now, like the fact that Neil is going to kill him when he finds out he's not in his room and the fact that, for the first time, someone outside of his house knows about his dad. Those should be the pressing issues, and they are. It's just that when he thinks about having to look in that girl's eyes again, and know that she knows everything, and know that she saw him, and know that he tried to kill her...well, he'd almost rather face Neil again.

So he just stays in the room (in the light of day, he realizes the room must be Joyce's, which sends a fresh wave of guilt through him. God, he tries to kill her kid and she gives him her room?), which, a small voice in the back of his head reminds him, is part of the reason they got in all this trouble in the first place. But this is different, he tells himself. He just doesn't want to see that girl, especially not like this, taken in like he's some some stray dog. He doesn't really want to see Joyce, either, not when she's taken care of him and told him she was worried about him and let him sleep in her bed all while he knows she's making the wrong choice. And he really, really doesn't want to see Harrington, not when Harrington had apologized to him last night, the goddamn idiot. Like they weren't in the house where Billy had shattered a plate over his head.

There's no one in this house that Billy wants to see, so he just stays in bed. It's not hard to do- his body still revolts every time he moves.

Max, though, is apparently not going to take this as an option.

"You're gonna have to do something," she says as she barges in, her arms full of food. She's got a thermos full of soup, a box of crackers, a bowl of fruit. She sits on the bed again -this is really becoming a theme- and begins eating the fruit. "Okay? You've gotta do something here." She holds up two fingers, talking with her mouth full of apple. "One- let people other than me in this room. Two- start leaving this room. Because this isn't going to work. Not anymore."

Billy's only been doing this for seven hours, and he wants to scream that he had just successfully stayed in his room for almost a week, so really, this is nothing, but he just takes the thermos. It's a little hard for him to drink from it, but Max is watching him warily, and he sure as hell isn't going to have her help him eat, so he ignores his ribs. "Why?"

Max throws her hands up in the air. "Because I have to go home in like an hour, Billy! I can't- I'm not gonna let you hole up in a room again."

"You know what, Maxine," he rubs his eyes, and there's some heat to his voice, "I'm getting pretty damn tired of you telling me what to do."

She glares at him. "Well, maybe," she spits, "If I thought you could do a halfway decent job of taking care of yourself, I wouldn't have to!"

He sees red for a second. "HEY! LISTEN! I've been taking care of myself since I was ten years old, and I sure as hell don't need some little snot nosed bitch to do it for me!"

He shouldn't have yelled. That's his first thought as soon as he takes a breath and he sees how Max is leaning away from him, how she's watching him like a wounded animal. He shouldn't have yelled, he thinks, and then he wonders when the hell he became someone who felt bad for yelling.

Max doesn't yell back, though, and she doesn't leave the room. She just stares at him, frozen, and then says, in a small voice, "he's been doing this since you were ten?"

All of the fight goes out of Billy just as quickly as it came. Dammit. He sighs.

“Listen, Max-“

Her face contorts. “No, you listen,” she hisses, everything about her voice changing. It’s not small anymore, it’s angry, and she’s leaning towards him now, knuckles white. “Maybe you have been doing this for awhile, but if it’s been anything like this last week, you’ve been doing a shit job of it. It’s not your job anymore, okay? It’s mine. I said I wasn’t gonna let you die, and I meant it.” (Those words vaguely ring a bell, but Billy can’t place them, honestly isn’t sure what the hell she’s talking about). “So it’s my job, and I say that I’m not leaving you until I know you’re not gonna be alone.”

Billy just stares at her. This relationship, he thinks, is getting so goddamn weird. But he finds that he can’t yell at Max again, can’t point out that she’s too small to protect him if she wanted to. Can’t bring himself to point out that he’s really not someone she should be protecting. So, against his will, he finds himself nodding. “Okay.”

xxx

It’s become apparent that Billy has no intention of leaving the room, and Steve realizes it would probably make more sense for him to just leave at this point. It’s not like he’s doing anything useful- not like he’s really done anything useful, actually, since they got to the Byers. But every time he thinks about leaving, he thinks about going back home to an empty house and Billy still being here covered in bruises and Steve not knowing what’s going on. He thinks about Billy trying to leave again, trying to get back to the house where his room is destroyed and his blood is on his mirror, and Steve realizes that he can’t actually bring himself to leave. Not yet.

So he spends his day with Joyce, Will, and El while Max dashes in between them and Billy’s room all day long. Will and Steve play card games with Joyce while El whispers with Mike on the phone in the background. Will, remarkably, doesn’t ask any questions about Billy (this, of course, may have to do with the conversation on the walkies that Steve overheard earlier, where Mike asked Will what the hell was going on at his house and why couldn’t he come over today and

Max had responded, at top volume, “IT’S NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS”).

When Joyce hands Max soup, crackers, and fruit for dinner, she says, very kindly, “I need to change all of the dressings on Billy’s bruises and cuts, Max. He’s gonna have to let someone in.”

Max sets her jaw, and nods with a determined glint in her eye before running back to Billy.

Steve sends Joyce a look, about to ask if they shouldn’t go in there and just get Billy, but she shakes her head like she’s reading his mind.

“We have to let him decide to let us help him, or it won’t do any good.”

Steve guffaws. “Yeah, but what if he decides not to?”

“He let us last night.”

“Yeah, because he was, like, shell-shocked or something. You should’ve heard him in the car before we got here. I thought he would kill us. If he’s like that again...”

Joyce purses her lips. “I don’t think he will be.”

“And if he is?”

Joyce’s answer is interrupted by the clear sound of Billy shouting, and Steve automatically stands. He resists the urge to say “I told you so,” which he thinks is pretty noble. The shouting stops almost as soon as it begins, though, and Joyce shakes her head again at Steve.

“Max will get us if she needs us.”

Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, Billy’s door opens and, this time, Max doesn’t exit alone.

Steve is beginning to feel like every time he sees Billy, it’s a different person. The Billy who heckled him in school wasn’t the Billy who

beat his face in, and the Billy who beat his face in wasn't the Billy trying to run Nancy over with his car. The Billy who stood up to the Mind Flayer wasn't the Billy in Steve's car last night, and the Billy he talked to on the couch wasn't the Billy who he helped Joyce patch up. The Billy who comes into the living room leaning on Max, true to form, isn't a Billy Steve has seen before, either.

His face is still royally fucked up, but it's not as harsh in the daylight, and the bandaids and general lack of blood make him look a little more held together. He's putting some of his weight on Max but is still holding his chin high, and the arm wrapped around his ribs isn't as desperate as it was the night before. He doesn't look angry, for once, and all of the shame and humiliation of last night is gone (thank God, because Steve would rather watch Billy start screaming again than see him look so defeated). Instead, Billy looks almost...resigned. Tired and wary, but not like he's two seconds away from losing it.

"Hi, Billy." Joyce says with a smile. "Would you like to take a seat?"

Max, a self satisfied smile on her face, helps Billy sit down across the room from Steve.

"Hi, Billy." El says softly, and Max's breath hitches.

There's something there, Steve realizes, which makes sense, considering Billy had literally thrown up when he saw her last night. They had all seen it at Starcourt- hadn't been able to hear what El had said, but they watched her touch Billy's face like he was a baby and watched Billy pick her up and save her.

Now, though, Billy silently nods without even looking her way. El doesn't seem offended, just watches him for a few minutes before exchanging a look with Max and retreating to her room.

Joyce clears her throat, and the card game starts back up again, but everyone's having a hard time focusing with Billy in the room (at least, Steve is). Steve feels like he's not supposed to be looking at Billy, but, at the same time, Billy just looks so different that he can't look away.

It's just that everything about him looks softer, somehow, and Steve is used to only seeing him painted in sharp lines. But something about the bruises and the calm and the oversized flannel make him seem so...not Billy. He doesn't know what it is, but-

"Good God, Harrington." Billy says in a tired voice. "Just stop staring."

Steve blushes -actually blushes, which is ridiculous, because since when does Steve Harrington blush?- and ducks his head.

Behind him, he hears Max stifle a laugh.

xxx

That night, when Susan and Neil get home, Max is sitting in the living room, watching TV.

"Is Billy still in his room?" Neil asks, and his tone is casual but the look he gives Billy's door makes Max freeze.

"I think so," she says, trying to speak at a normal pace. "I haven't seen him come out."

Neil grunts. "I don't know how much longer I'll stand for this kind of laziness." He shakes his head at Max in a knowing way. "Respect and responsibility, Max. It's gotta be learned."

Max just nods and sits on her hands so he can't see the way they're shaking. Shit, she thinks. Shit shit shit.

11. All the Nightmares Came Today

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry it took me so long to update! Life has been a little crazy recently. But the good news is that I've now pretty much mapped out everything about this story, and I've got a clear idea on how everything happens.

Also, this chapter finally features both Steve and Billy actually speaking to each other. So. Thanks for reading!

Steve can't sleep. He's sure that at least a part of that is because he's on one of the lumpiest couches he's ever seen, and also because the crick in his neck never really went away. The other part, though (okay, fine, the much bigger part), is that every time he closes his eyes he sees Billy.

He sees more than Billy, of course. He sees all of it- the Mind Flayer, El being dragged to the front like a sacrificial lamb, kids screaming and throwing fireworks, Billy being hoisted into the air while screaming in pain. He sees Max screaming over Billy's body. He sees Max crying on Billy's floor, Billy laying in a bed looking like death. He sees Billy yelling in the car, sees Billy looking like a shadow of himself in Joyce's house. And, over and over again, he sees Billy's back. Sees the way he shakes when Joyce and Steve touch him.

And, God, Steve just can't get it to stop, no matter how many times he rolls over or counts sheep or makes a hundred different lists. He just keeps seeing Billy.

He's starting to accept this as his new fate- he used to not be able to go to sleep because of demodogs and the way Nancy's mouth moved when she said "bullshit," and now he can't go to sleep because of Billy Hargrove. There are worse things, he tell himself. This, like everything else, isn't permanent. But every time he closes his eyes he sees Billy's back and his stomach absolutely wrenches and Steve thinks that maybe this will always hurt just this bad.

He closes his eyes. Starts a new list. Places He Could Bury a Body. #1: The quarry. #2: Behind the school football field. #3: the-

He hears movement and opens his eyes just in time to see Billy close the front door behind him. His stomach drops and he scrambles off the couch. No, he thinks. No, no, no. How could Billy be so hellbent on leaving? How-

Billy is sitting on the porch steps, lighting a cigarette. He raises his eyebrows at Steve, who nearly trips in his rush to get out the door.

“Going somewhere, pretty boy?”

All of the air rushes out of Steve in one big breath, and he feels, for a moment, nothing but relief. He’s not going to have to drag Billy back. Not right now.

“I thought you were leaving,” he admits, and Billy smiles lifelessly at him.

“Can’t.” Billy takes a drag of the cigarette, and Steve doesn’t miss the way he winces when his arms comes above his ribcage. “Max won’t let me.”

He sounds so serious that Steve can’t help but laugh. How is it, he wonders, that he and Billy, arguably two of the coolest people in Hawkins, are constantly bowing to the will of middle schoolers?

He takes a seat next to Billy, reaches out a hand expectantly. “Come on, man, give me a smoke.”

Billy passes the box, eyebrows once again raised. “Didn’t take you for the bad boy type, Harrington.”

“Hargrove, you don’t know shit about me.”

Steve feels so relieved to see Billy like this -beat to hell, yes, but nothing like he is when Steve closes his eyes- that he can’t keep a small smile off his face.

When he finishes lighting his cigarette, Billy’s looking at him like he’s grown a second head. All of that energy that has always defined Billy (the energy that has been deafeningly absent since they came to the

Byers) is back, just a little bit, crackling below the surface of Billy's eyes. Steve feels suddenly nervous. He wonders if Billy's about to start screaming again.

But Billy just stares at him, licks his teeth in a way that makes Steve feel like they're on the basketball court. "I don't know shit about you," he repeats, voice pitched high. God, is that how he thinks Steve sounds? "Well, you got that fucking right, buddy. So come on. Why don't you tell me?" He's sounding a little angry now, and Steve really isn't sure where this is coming from or where it's gonna go. Billy breathes deeply, clamps the cigarette between his lips, and says, with gritted teeth, "why you?"

"Huh?" Steve repeats, and wow, if only Robin was here to see him now, she'd have a field day with how eloquent he's being.

"Why you?" Billy repeats, voice gravelly. "Come on, Harrington. Why you? My bitch sister is calling around Hawkins for someone tall enough to boost her through a window and she picks you?" Finally, Steve understands the question. "Why you?"

His eyes are hot on Steve's skin, and Steve has to remind himself not to be defensive. He's been afraid this whole night that Billy was going to try to leave- he can't be angry with him now that he's stayed. "I don't really know," he answers, trying to be honest. "The brats are always asking me for stuff. Maybe this was just one of those things."

Billy shakes his head. "Don't give me that bullshit. Max calls you up to say I need your help and you just hop in your car and come? I don't think so." His whole face flinches, so quickly Steve almost misses it, and he blows out some smoke. "Come on, Harrington. What's the deal here?" He inhales sharply. "What're you getting out of this? Why are you still here?"

Steve's stomach clenches again, and, once again, he just feels so damn exhausted with all of this. Of course, he thinks. Of course Billy thinks he's only here because he's getting something out of this. He sighs.

"Billy," he says slowly, "I just wanted to help. I asked if you were okay, and next thing I know, Max called me and I was crawling

through your window.” He rubs the bridge of his nose, brings the cigarette back to his mouth. Wonders if he sounds as genuine as he’s trying to. “I’m just here to help.”

Billy snorts. “Whatever.”

xxx

Steve Harrington is full of shit. Billy’s sure of this. Yeah, maybe, it’s possible that he helped Max because he was just trying to be a good guy. But there’s no reason for him to still be here after Max told him he could leave, after it’s clear that Billy doesn’t need a hospital. Billy can’t figure out what Steve’s getting out of this- maybe it’s just the satisfaction of seeing Billy look so pathetic. Billy doesn’t know. Whatever it is, Steve’s not telling him.

“Whatever.”

Steve scoffs. “Whatever,” he repeats. “Think what you want to.” He doesn’t seem angry, though, not like Billy feels. He just seems tired.

Then again, Steve never really seems angry. Annoyed, yeah. Irritated. Not angry, though. Not like Billy. Billy was only able to get him angry a couple of times before- once on the night when he broke his nose. Billy wonders what that’s like- how does Steve have energy for anything? Billy would never have the energy to do a damn thing if he wasn’t angry. Again, Billy just doesn’t understand. How the hell is this tired boy sitting next to him the King Steve that was so hard to replace?

Billy snorts. “Ya know,” he says, snubbing his cigarette butt and lighting a new one, “when I first got to Hawkins, I couldn’t find one damn person in the whole fucking school who would shut up about you. Everyone talked about you like you shit gold or something- I didn’t buy it, but hey, I figured you had to be at least kinda hot shit for them to all be kissing your ass like that when you weren’t around. I was excited to meet you, Harrington. But just- just look at you.” He gestures at Steve’s whole body, noting the vaguely amused look fixed on the boy’s face. “I’ve never been so goddamn disappointed in my life.”

Billy doesn't really know what he's going for- to rile Harrington up, to make him mad, to get him to leave. He doesn't know, okay? The words are coming and he doesn't have the energy to stop them. What he knows he wasn't planning on, though, is for Steve to laugh.

Steve's laugh is soft and real, not cruel or offended. He lays back on the porch, hands behind his head, and his shirt rides up a little bit, showing a strip of his stomach. Billy looks away.

"The problem, Hargrove," Steve says, waving the cigarette in the air to punctuate his words, "is that you caught me at a bad time. I was hot shit, okay? The hottest. But by the time you got there... well, I was in love and I had already started swinging baseball bats at monsters. I had bigger stuff going on." He laughs again, returns the cigarette to his lips. "If you had gotten here a year earlier? God, Hargrove." Steve grins big and wide, eyes closed. "You woulda eaten your heart out."

Billy likes the sound of that.

"You never would've beaten me, Harrington, don't kid yourself."

Steve laughs again. "Yeah, maybe not. But I'm telling you, Hargrove. The fight would've been good."

Billy laughs now, can't stop himself. The idea of him trying to beat out Steve Harrington -who wears Polo sweaters and drives a BMW and probably listens to Cyndi Lauper- and Steve actually fighting back and, well. It sounds fun. A lot better than whatever the hell it ended up being.

Steve, apparently encouraged by the laugh, keeps going. "Hawkins wouldn't've known what to do with themselves. God, Hawkins is a... I don't know if you realized this, Hargrove, but I didn't have much competition to worry about here. Both of us? At the same time? We woulda had the school on its knees."

Billy grins, looking up at the sky, and he can feel Steve's eyes on him.

Steve pauses, and then says, very quietly: "Maybe we would've been friends."

Billy barks out a laugh, and he knows it sounds harsh, and he wants it to. “Don’t shit yourself, Harrington.”

Steve sighs, closes his eyes. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Billy can feel the anger rising again, and he doesn’t even know why. But the idea that he and Steve would’ve been friends...they wouldn’t have been. That’s all there is to it. They’re not the same, no matter what Steve thinks he was. Steve has to be able to see that, has to be able to see that he and Billy were never gonna be the same, not even before Billy tried to kill him and became an actual monster.

But Billy also feels...something, when he sees the way Steve’s face falls and the bags under Steve’s eyes. Guilt, maybe? He doesn’t know. He wants to hear Steve laugh again, though. Wants him to stop looking like he’s about to drop dead from exhaustion. So, once again, Billy just lets the words come out of his mouth without bothering to stop them.

“Did you know I almost fucked Nancy’s mom?”

Steve bolts up into a sitting position so quickly that Billy has to lean back to avoid being hit, and the look on Steve’s face is so cartoonish that, for the second time tonight, he laughs.

“You- WHAT? Mrs. Wheeler?”

Bills nods. “Karen.”

“KAREN?” Steve actually yells, and then immediately claps a hand over his mouth, looking back at the house. When no lights turn on, he looks back at Billy, mouth open wide. “You didn’t.”

Billy shrugs. “I didn’t,” he admits. “But I almost did.” He grins, loving how wide Steve’s eyes go. “Had a hotel room and everything.”

Steve blinks at him, and then begins- well, the only word Billy knows for it is cackling. “Holy shit!” Steve wheezes, doubling over. “Holy fucking shit, Hargrove! You” -Steve is laughing so hard he can barely get the words out- “you almost slept with Mrs. Wheeler!” He looks up at Billy, tears in his eyes. “Damn, Hargrove, you don’t fucking play around, do you?” He laughs into his arm, and Billy feels something

warm in his chest that he immediately tries to ignore. “Did she actually- did she meet you?”

Billy shrugs. He remembers, hazily, Karen saying something to him - an apology- but mostly he remembers trying to keep himself from bashing her head in against his will, so he’s really not sure. “Don’t know. I was on my way when- you know.” He waves at his face, remembers what it was like to have that thing clamp down on his mouth. “It got me.”

The smile drops from Steve’s face, and Billy wishes he hadn’t told the whole story.

“Well, fuck.” Steve whispers, still wiping tears from his eyes. He grinds his cigarette butt under his heel, and Billy watches as the orange glow disappears into gray ash. Steve rubs his face. “Listen, Hargrove. I can’t sleep, and I can’t stay awake, so I’m just gonna go make some coffee, okay? You want some?”

Billy nods, quiet as Steve pushes himself to a standing position. Steve waves a hand at him.

“Just don’t- don’t leave, okay?” he says as he opens the door. “I can’t take Max killing me right now.”

Billy watches the door shut behind Steve, finishes off his second cigarette. Looks up at the sky.

Maybe we would’ve been friends, he repeats in his mind. He knows they wouldn’t have, knows a lot of stuff Steve doesn’t seem to grasp. But. Still. It’s a thought.

Maybe we would’ve been friends.

12. And It Looks as Though They're Here to Stay

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child abuse

Thanks for reading!

Billy wakes up to the pale kid with a bowl cut standing in his doorway, a walkie in his hand.

He's staring at Billy with wide eyes -though, to be fair, every time Billy has seen this kid his eyes have been wide- and, from the walkie talkie, there is the unmistakable ranting of Billy's stepsister.

"Everyone turn off your walkies NOW, do you understand me? NOW."

"Max, that's completely unfair, you can't use the party channel and then expect-"

"Turn them off NOW, dipshits!"

The Byers kid slowly raises the walkie talkie and almost whispers "Max, I have Billy. Over."

Billy pulls the sheet up over his chest, trying to cover the bruises, and the kid blushes. He holds out the walkie talkie, his body as far away from Billy's as possible.

"It's Max," he says, as if the screeching hadn't made that obvious, "she needs to talk to you."

Reluctantly, Billy takes the walkie. He hates these things, he really does, has hated for months the way he's been subjected to hearing 12 year old voices in his house at all times of the day and night. The kid -Will, he tells himself, the brat's name is Will- lingers in the doorway for a second, still looking at Billy like he's an alien, before firmly shutting the door behind him.

Billy groans. This is not how he wanted to start his day. (But, then

again, when was the last time Billy got to start his day the way he wanted?)

“Listen up, lardasses,” he growls into the walkie, trying to throw all of his annoyance into menacing the hell out of these dumbasses. “Get off. Now.”

For a good bit, there’s total silence. And then, finally, Max starts speaking again. “I think they’re gone. If they’re not, I swear I’ll gut them like pigs.”

How did these kids even keep themselves in line before Max? God, no wonder they’re so lame. “You better have something damn good if you had to wake me up for it.”

“Ok, first off, Billy, it’s 11:30, so that’s really on you, not me.” Billy looks at the clock. Shit. He and Harrington had stayed on the porch late last night, drinking some of the worst coffee he’s ever had. He has no idea how long he’s been asleep. “Second off, I can’t come over today, okay?” Max’s end cuts off for a moment before crackling back on. “Mom and Neil want us to take a family trip to the movie, or some shit. But, Billy...” she’s silent for so long that Billy thinks she’s gone.

“WHAT, Max?”

“Neil’s getting angry again.” Max says it so fast that it takes Billy’s mind a second to catch up to what she’s said. “He says you have to come out of your room soon. Or else.”

Billy’s stomach drops. He’d known this was coming. As far as Neil knows, he’s been locked in his room for over a week now- honestly, Billy’s amazed it’s taken this long for Neil to get upset. (It shouldn’t have taken this long, something in his mind screams. Neil should’ve been worried way before now. He should be scared that Billy was dead).

“Billy? Did you hear me?”

“So what’s the plan, Maxine?” He snarls into the walkie, ignoring the way his hands are starting to shake. “You said you were working on

one, and it sounds like it's fucking time to me.”

“I don’t know, okay?” Max sounds angry. Frantic. “I’ll figure it out. I just wanted you to have a heads up. I’m sorry, okay?” The anger dissipates and she just sounds scared. Of Billy? For Billy? Something. “I’m sorry, and I’m going to figure it out.”

You’ve got to stop getting so angry at her, a voice in Billy’s head says, and he hates that it’s right. She’s the only person who has your back, the voice insists, and a different voice screams back that that’s her own damn fault. She knows what Billy’s like.

(Maybe we would’ve been friends, a new voice says, but Billy ignores it).

He sighs. Rubs his forehead, pulls at the bandaid holding his eyebrow together. There’s a haze growing in his mind, and it’s getting hard to breathe. “This isn’t gonna last much longer,” he says, and his left hand is shaking so bad that he almost drops the walkie, but he tries to keep his voice stable. “I just need to come home.”

“NO!” Max screams, cutting through the haze. “Billy, listen to me, do not come home. No matter what. Do not come home. You can’t. We’re going to figure this out, we are. Just stay- just stay there, okay? STAY THERE.” Her voice cuts out, and then comes back, much quieter: “I have to go, Billy. But you can’t...don’t. Promise me, now. I have to go. But say it. Say you’ll stay there.”

Billy is so fucking tired. The haze is growing. “Max-“

“Say it, Billy. Say it now.”

Yes sir, his mind prompts out of habit. He closes his eyes. “I’ll stay here.”

Silence. “Thank you. I have to go, Billy, I have to go, but- I’ll call when I can. Bye.”

Billy throws the walkie at the wall. Clenches his hands. Tries to breathe through the saltwater.

His dad is going to kill him.

xxx

In the kitchen, Eleven, Joyce, and Steve all stare silently at each other over the walkie sitting on the table, while Will quietly pulls his ear away from Billy's door.

Shit.

xxx

Listening in on Billy and Max's conversation isn't a decision that Joyce is proud of. She feels guilty about, hates knowing that Billy never would've sounded so defeated if he had known that anyone other than Max could hear. But she needs to know what's going on, and neither Max nor Billy have said anything other than what was necessary. Neither of them have even said out loud that it was Billy's dad who destroyed him- they just let El say it that first night and never said it again.

(Not that she blames them, of course. You do what it takes to survive. She just needs them to trust her to help them survive).

Steve and El are both looking at her like she needs to make a statement, and Will has just shown up in the kitchen with a look on his face that lets her know that he heard it all, too.

Joyce hates this. She misses Hopper.

"Billy's papa," El says again, repeating the words that have been clanging around in Joyce's head ever since they were first uttered, "is a bad man."

"Can you see him?" Will asks. "Did you get your-"

El shakes her head, glares at the table. "No. They're still gone. But I saw- before. With the Mind Flayer. His papa is a bad man." She glances at Joyce. "He's scared. All the time."

Joyce knows that, of course. But it hurts to hear it. Steve makes a small noise in the back of his throat at El's words, busies himself with digging his fingernail into the table.

"What do we do?" Will asks, and Joyce wishes she had an answer.

"I don't know." Joyce is fucking sick and tired of not knowing what to do. She's sick and tired of doing this without Hopper. What, she's just supposed to live like this now? "But we keep him here, and we take care of him. That's what we can do right now. We keep being kind."

Steve looks up at her, face twisted. "That's not enough." He stands and stalks out of the kitchen. "That's not fucking enough."

I know, Joyce thinks, ignoring the way El and Will are staring after Steve in shock. Trust me, I know.

xxx

Last night with Billy had seemed so...well, the word normal isn't right, because 'normal' between Billy and Steve usually involves tension and threats and anger, and last night hadn't been that. Like, sure, Billy hadn't been exactly pleasant, but he hadn't been terrifying and he hadn't been miserable, and those are really the only two modes Steve knows Billy in. Last night, though, had been...nice.

Okay, nice isn't a good word either, but it's all Steve's got.

He had liked it, though. As much as he could like a conversation that involved an abused teenager and his ex girlfriend's mom and being possessed by a monster. He had liked thinking about what could've been- and yeah, he's obviously glad that he's not a douche anymore and that he's not who he was when he was fifteen, but it's kind of nice to think about how much fucking fun he and Billy would have had if they had just met earlier, before the monsters and before the heartbreak and before it all.

(Billy doesn't have a before, though, Steve's mind screams at him. He lives with Neil. The Upside Down didn't start all of this for him).

For a moment, over really bad coffee -why is it so hard to remember ratios?- Steve had genuinely thought that, maybe, he and Billy could be friends one day.

And then this morning had happened and he had listened to Max tell

Billy that Neil was mad and he had heard Billy so clearly be afraid and he remembers, now, that this isn't about him and Billy learning not to hate each other. This is about Billy really, truly needing help, and Steve just can't fucking save him.

He wants to save him -wants to take a baseball bat to Neil like he was another Demogorgon and call it a day- but Steve can't even tell if Billy wants to be saved, not when he's ready to go back to that house at every sign of fear, and Steve can't figure out a plan where no one goes to jail.

God, what is Steve supposed to do? What's the right thing here? Snapping at Joyce obviously wasn't it, but she didn't know what to do either, and Steve just needs someone to tell him what to do.

Stay with Billy, Max had said. And, well, Steve can still do that.

So Steve leaves the kitchen and goes to Billy's room, ready to go in and, hopefully, have another conversation that just seems...nice.

So Steve opens the door without knocking -not his best idea, no, but when has Steve ever gone with his best idea?- and that's how Steve finds Billy Hargrove, scariest high schooler he knows, crying on the floor.

Shit.

13. What Are We Coming To

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: panic attack, one instance of homophobic language

I feel like a broken record but honestly, you guys reading this is amazing and your comments are the best. Thank you!!

Also, don't worry- Max will be back very soon.

Billy can't BREATHE. He can't and he's trying but there's no air and his lungs are full of saltwater and his dad is going to KILL him, he's going to do it this time, no more threats, he's just going to kill him because Billy TOLD and all of these people KNOW even though Billy didn't want them to but they do and it's too late and Neil is going to find them and Billy's going to die because even if Neil doesn't kill him he's going to die, right here, right now because he can't BREATHE.

Billy's heart is beating so fast that it's hurting his chest, and maybe this is a heart attack, maybe this is how he dies, maybe Joyce and Steve come upstairs and find him dead and oh GOD Joyce and Steve what if Neil finds them too and they shouldn't know and they shouldn't be helping and Billy's done really bad, awful, terrible, disgusting things and he's not the kind of person Steve Harrington should get hurt for and no no no and Billy can't breathe.

Someone's in the room now and Billy doesn't know who but maybe, maybe, it's finally Neil. They can stop pretending anything's going to change. This is it. Billy's going to die.

xxx

Billy Hargrove is crying on the floor and holding a hand over his chest and breathing like he's being attacked and his eyes are a million miles away.

Steve should go get Joyce, but now Billy's scrambling away from him and Steve is thinking about Billy's back and oh God what if Billy hurts himself and Steve can't leave but also Steve has no idea what the fuck he's supposed to be doing here.

"Billy, Billy, you're okay, it's-"

"I didn't mean to!" Billy rasps out, and Steve can't tell who he's talking to. "I didn't mean to! They brought me here! I wasn't going to tell, I swear, I never told, I didn't mean to!"

Shit. Shitshitshit. "Billy, it's Steve, please, I-"

Billy's breathing, somehow, gets even faster, and his chest is heaving. "Steve," he repeats, and his hands claw at the ground. "I didn't mean to. I didn't mean any of it."

Steve really doesn't know what's happening, but Billy stops speaking, thank God, but then he starts shaking all over, literally sobbing, which is worse. This is worse.

Steve doesn't have a lot of experience dealing with crying people. Hell, Steve doesn't have a lot of experience with crying. (Robin says he needs to get more in touch with his emotions). But Nancy liked to be held when she cried, and Steve can't hold Billy, first off because he's Billy, but also because he's covered in marks and Steve can't hurt him anymore, but, really, Steve's mind is racing, and this is the only thing he can think of.

So Steve does what he can.

xxx

The someone is holding Billy's hand and they're not trying to break it.

xxx

Steve is HOLDING Billy Hargrove's HAND and what the FUCK.

xxx

When Billy was little, really little, and he would cry, for stupid reasons, like falling or getting yelled at, his mom would sing to him and hold him and make quiet shushing noises and right now Billy thinks that maybe the someone in the room is his mom, because the hand that's holding his is firm and warm and the voice is saying very quietly "Billy, it's okay. You're okay," and Billy is starting to believe it.

His heart isn't trying to crack open his ribcage anymore, and the water in his lungs is going back with the tide. He's becoming aware that his face is covered with tears and snot and he realizes that oh, maybe he's been crying, and he's on the floor, and this is all pretty fucking embarrassing, isn't it? But he can breathe again, a little, and he's starting to get control of his own mind back, and no one in his head is screaming anymore, except for that one voice that keeps whispering "maybe we would've been friends."

xxx

It's not so much that Billy opens his eyes and sees Steve as it is that life comes back to Billy's eyes and he actually looks at Steve.

Steve's heart is going so fast. So, so fast. He had wondered, for a minute, if maybe Billy wasn't going to come back from wherever it was that he went. Steve doesn't know how these things work, just knows that he'll do anything in his power to keep Billy from ever doing that again.

Shit.

Billy looks at Steve and sees him, and he looks down at their hands, fingers still intertwined, and he doesn't pull away, not immediately, which is kind of what Steve had been expecting.

(He had been expecting for Billy to scream and call him a fag and throw stuff at him and honestly, Steve hadn't even cared, he had been so desperate for Billy to stop crying).

Instead, Billy just looks at Steve, wiping his face with the back of his other hand and taking a few deep, shaky breathes. And then, slowly, he moves his hand away from Steve's.

(Steve is alarmed to realize that he doesn't want Billy to).

"Harrington," he says, and his voice is calm and lucid and completely free of anger, "you need to leave. Now."

Steve wants to say no, wants to say that he's here to stay, but Billy still looks so fragile and he sounds so serious and so determined and Steve's heart is pounding now and he's scared, okay? He's scared. He can't do this. He's not equipped to put Billy Hargrove back together. And so he gets up.

And Steve leaves.

xxx

Steve leaves. Thank God. Because if Steve leaves, that's one less person who will get caught in the wake of Billy's mess, and Billy just wants, desperately, to stop hurting people.

He ignores the way his chest feels when Steve shuts the door behind him, ignores the way his hand goes cold as soon as he takes it out of Steve's.

Steve had to leave, he just had to. Billy can't... it's wrong to let people get too invested in him. This is all going to go very badly.

Steve's gone, thank God. Next, Billy will work on Joyce. And then, finally, Max will see that this isn't her job, that she doesn't have to be involved in all of this.

And then it'll just be Billy, just like it's always been.

xxx

Steve makes it all the way to his car when he remembers that he's done this before. He's been scared shitless and run from the Byers house before, and he's left people behind him in danger. This isn't new.

Last time, though, he had turned around.

He'd done it once. And he can do it again.

Billy's finally made it to a standing position when Steve Harrington barges back in, eyes wild.

"Sorry, Hargrove." There's a fire there, and Billy thinks that maybe, just maybe, he's looking at King Steve. "But you're the one who told me to plant my feet."

"You," Billy is forgetting how to talk, "are a goddamn idiot."

Steve nods. "Yup. Kind of my thing."

Billy doesn't want to smile. He doesn't. But it just kind of happens.

Maybe we would've been friends, his mind whispers, and another voice whispers back: maybe we still could be.

God, he's getting to be as stupid as Harrington.

14. No Room for Me

Notes for the Chapter:

warnings: referenced child abuse

Ah!!!!!! Thank you so much for all your comments!

I have to confess that originally Steve wasn't going to come back- he was going to just leave the Byers. But then I realized that would, honestly, be so out of character for him- the amazing thing about Steve is that he just has a beautiful character arc in the show, and he really has grown into a crazy loyal guy. I love him. Anyways, thanks for reading!

Also, I edited this just a little bit when I read a comment and realized I was using the 'plant your feet' quote incorrectly in basketball terms (also I never bothered to actually check the scene to see what billy said because I'm an idiot). I didn't edit anything that changes the storyline, just a reference Billy makes!

Neil doesn't say anything about Billy when they get home from the movie- just knocks on his door, shakes his head at Max's mom when there's no answer. And Max's mom just frowns, and what the hell? It's not NORMAL for someone to lock themselves in their room for over a week, and everyone should be way more worried than they are because they don't even know if Billy has FOOD in there and they both know that's he's beat to hell so why the HELL aren't either of them more worried?

Obviously, Max knows she shouldn't be upset about this, since it really works in her favor. But it's WRONG, and if she knows it, so should they.

It's not Neil she's upset with. (Well, she's upset with Neil, but it's on a different level. She HATES Neil). It's her mom.

Because her mom is kind and caring and she still brushes Max's hair when she feels feverish and she's Max's mom, but she knows what's happening to Billy and she doesn't care. And, yeah, Max used to know without doing anything, too, has known for longer than she'd like to admit. But she didn't KNOW, not at first. She knew Neil hit Billy and she knew he yelled and she knew he scared the shit out of Billy, but she didn't know that there was more than the open handed slaps she sometimes saw. She didn't know that he made Billy cry. She didn't know that he broke Billy.

Max knows now, though. And now that she knows, she knows that she should've known earlier -she should've known back in California, it shouldn't have taken her until she and Billy shared a wall- and she knows that her mom definitely knows.

But her mom doesn't fix it. So it's up to Max.

She doesn't have a plan, okay? She's looking for one. She really is. But they can't go to the cops, because no one is going to believe Billy over Neil because Neil seems like a good guy and Billy seems like an absolute asshole and she's pretty sure Billy wouldn't talk to cops, anyways. (He HATED that Max was friends with the Chief's daughter. He would almost refuse to ever drive Max to their house, even when he was in his super submissive phase directly after the demodogs attack. It was a whole thing).

It's only a matter of days before Neil starts looking for Billy, and Max has no plan and she's pretty sure from their conversation on the walkies that Billy is minutes away from crawling back to their house so that he can get his ass kicked again.

(Billy's used to getting his ass kicked, though, so maybe he could make it. But Max thinks about the way he looked on that mattress and the way he looked when the Mind Flayer was about to kill him and the way he looked on the Byers' couch and...well, Max isn't sure Billy wants to make it much longer, and so she's sure as hell not going to risk it).

Max has no plan.

Max has no plan, and they're running out of time on both ends.

Harrington is hovering. Billy doesn't love the word, but it's the only way to describe how no matter what he does, Steve is just...there. If Billy's in the room, Steve is sitting on the floor. If Billy goes to the living room, Steve is on the couch. If Billy goes to the kitchen, Steve is five feet behind him.

Billy is pretty sure that Steve is afraid to leave him alone after he found him crying like a bitch and half out of his mind, which is... Billy doesn't want to think about it. He doesn't let people see him like that, okay? No one. The idea of Steve seeing him like that...it makes his skin crawl. And Steve holding his hand, which is worse. Billy simultaneously can't think about it at all or get it out of his head.

Between that and Steve coming back (and saying that Billy told him to plant his feet, which, goddamn, Harrington, Billy had just said that because he was sick of watching Steve suck and he just wanted to actually win a basketball game one day), Billy has a hard time even looking at Steve.

Steve doesn't have a hard time looking at Billy, though. Billy can't move without feeling Steve's eyes on him. No wonder he's so weird with those kids- he's probably the best damn babysitter in the world. (Billy thinks he looks away when Joyce changes all the bandages and reapplies all the creams, though, which Billy doesn't blame him for. It's disgusting).

Finally, after dinner, when Billy's back in the bed and Steve is still just sitting there, Billy feels like he has to say something.

"Do you not remember that I tried to break your nose?"

Steve snorts. "Oh, you succeeded."

Billy has to consciously keep his mouth from falling open. "So is that your deal, Harrington? Someone tries to kill you and you just become their... like fucking shadow or some shit?"

Steve stares at him. "You think I should still be mad about the fight." He says it like it's a new realization for him, and he is really actually

such an idiot.

“It wasn’t a fight, Harrington. I beat the shit out of you.”

Steve rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Yeah. Look,” he shrugs, “I figure we’re even, you know? You wrecked my face, I wrecked your car. And you’re not—“ Steve cuts himself off suddenly here and looks down.

“I’m not what?” Billy pushes, and Steve sighs.

“You’re clearly not a stranger to having the shit knocked out of you.” Steve mumbles quietly. “So I just figure, ya know. You’ve probably paid your dues.”

Billy laughs. “It’s gonna take a lot more than this for me to pay my dues.” He’s thinking about Heather, about her parents, about that kid, about all of it, but he shouldn’t have said anything, because Steve’s face just goes soft and Billy hates the way Steve’s eyes look when he does that. Billy is beginning to just sort of hate Steve’s face in general, actually. He rolls his eyes. “Fuck you, Harrington.”

Steve’s frown changes. He’s annoyed now. Thank God. It’s twenty times better than the sad puppy eyes. “Why do you pull this shit, Hargrove? What’s your deal?”

“Hey, I don’t have a ‘deal’—“

“Yeah, you do. People are nice to you and you’re an asshole.”

“What do you mean people are—“

“I’m being nice to you right now! Max is always nice to you! And you’re just—“

“HEY! You don’t know SHIT about me and Max, so—“

“You do this on purpose!” It’s like a light goes on in Harrington’s eyes. “You pick fights and honestly, what the fuck? Don’t you ever just get...I don’t know. Don’t you ever get tired of it?”

Tired of it? It’s the only way Billy finds any energy at all. But he can’t

say that, so he just snarls: “Not all of us are pussies, princess.”

Steve sighs and he just seems...disappointed? God, what does he want from Billy?

“Maybe you’re not tired of it.” His voice is losing all of its heat. “But I fucking am, so just...Just stop it, Billy.”

Bill had held hands with this boy earlier today, and it was the safest he had felt in weeks. Billy had held hands with this boy, and the boy had seen him cry, and the boy had stayed for Billy, and now he...what? What does he want?

Billy looks at the ceiling. It’s like Steve makes him feel angry and makes him feel warm and makes him want to scream and cry and laugh and makes his breathing tight all at the same time. Billy doesn’t know what it is, but it’s not fucking great.

When he looks back down, Steve is still staring at him, because of course Steve is. Steve is clearly trying to decide if he should say something or not, and Billy is inwardly begging him not to.

Steve doesn’t get the message.

“When this all started,” he says quietly, and then winces. “And I mean, ya know. The monster stuff. It started because- well, it started with Will. But it also started with a girl. In my pool. She was Nancy’s friend, and she was over with Nancy, and I took Nancy upstairs to sleep with her and we just...left her. I thought she went home. But she didn’t. And she died. And I always thought...maybe that was on me, ya know? Like, if I hadn’t been a douche or I hadn’t been so horny or something, she would’ve made it.” Steve’s still watching Billy, and his voice is so quiet that Billy’s leaning forward to hear him. “But I thought, no. It’s not on me. And the monster was dead, and Nancy and I were in love, and everything seemed so good. But then...” something flickers in Steve’s face, and he looks down at the floor. “I was wrong. Nancy and I weren’t in love. And she was still angry about Barb. Still hurt. And I thought, ya know. If I was wrong about Nancy, what else was I wrong about? And then the monsters came back, and I had been wrong about them being gone, too. And then you happened. And I’m not gonna lie, Billy,” Steve looks back

up at him, and he looks so vulnerable that Billy wants to look away, but, for the first time today, he can't take his eyes off of Steve. "I thought that maybe you trying to kill me was my price to pay for Barb. So I get it, okay? I know what it feels like to feel...guilty. I don't know. I get it, though. But you...you've paid your dues, man. You've just gotta keep going now."

Billy feels something hot rising in his throat, and he wants to be angry, but Steve just doesn't get it. Still. "Listen, Harrington. I didn't accidentally let one girl die in my pool. I gave people to It. On purpose. Okay? It told me to do it and I did and all those people died. So don't act like you and I are anything alike." He breathes heavily, and he's horrified to feel tears coming to his eyes. Shit. He swallows it all down. He's cried in front of Harrington once today, he'll be damned if he ever does it again. "Why are you here, Harrington?" The question still won't stop running through his head.

Steve shrugs. "Like I said, Hargrove. I'm planting my feet."

"Why?"

"Cause I'm a goddamn idiot, Billy. God, you think you'd get tired of having the same conversations over and over." Steve stands up. "I'm not gonna...I'm not gonna, like, watch you sleep, so I'll leave you alone. Just..." he shakes his head. "I don't know, Hargrove. Have a good night." He shuts the bedroom door behind him without another word.

xxx

When Max gets to the Byers house, Steve is asleep on the floor in front of Billy's door, which is pretty damn weird. She almost mentions it to Billy, but there's really no telling how Billy will react, so she doesn't bother. Instead, she says: "I think I have a plan."

Billy doesn't even really react, just raises his eyebrows. "Okay," he says with no enthusiasm. "So do I."

"If your plan is coming home-"

"I'm coming home, Max." God, he's such an asshole. "If you can hold

off Neil for a couple more days, I think I could climb through the window if you and Harrington give me a shove.”

Max is pretty sure she’s not supposed to be annoyed with Billy right now, but it’s how she feels.

“I’m not gonna let you come home.” She tries to steel her voice. “And I’m not gonna let him find you.”

“Ever? Come on. We both know I’m gonna have to go back.”

Max shakes her head, already knowing Billy is going to hate her plan (mostly because it’s not a real plan, she thinks, and then immediately tells herself to shut up). “I’ve been thinking,” she says slowly. “And now that you’re out...”

“No, Max...”

“I mean, why WOULD you come back?” Billy shakes his head while Max just picks up steam. “I mean, you’re almost eighteen. We just have to make it until then, and then he can’t-“

“That’s your plan? That’s MONTHS, okay? He’ll find me before then.”

“But what if he didn’t? We could just-“

“He WILL, and if he finds me before I come home, he’ll-“

Billy speaks so confidently that Max just knows. She feels something twist in her gut and she knows.

“You’ve done this before.” Max whispers, and Billy freezes. “Run away. You’ve done it. You have, haven’t you?”

He looks like he’s about to yell at her, and she braces herself, but then something in his face changes. “Yeah. Twice,” he says quietly.

Max’s breathing gets heavier. “And he found you?”

“Yeah. Both times. Listen, Max. He’ll find me. I know he probably seems like he doesn’t care if I live or die, but he’ll....he’ll find me. I’m gonna have to come home.”

Max hates Neil. She HATES him. Because if Billy's ever run away, it was before he lived with her. And if it was before he lived with her, he had been...okay, so yeah, Max knows it's been going on since Billy was ten. But still. Twelve is just too little to run away from home. Twice.

Something hardens in Max's heart, and Max had thought her heart was already as hard as it could be. But then she thinks about a ten year old Billy again, and...

"You didn't have me last time." Max tilts her chin up. "But you do now. And I...we're gonna do it this time, Billy. I've killed monsters, okay? We're gonna do it this time."

xxx

Billy knows she's wrong. But the voice in his head is chanting some sort of combination now of "you're always an asshole" and "maybe we would've been friends" and "maybe we still could be" and Billy doesn't have the strength to shut it up so he just looks at the ceiling.

When this all goes to shit, Billy is going to do whatever it takes to make sure Max isn't caught in the crossfire.

15. No Fun for You

Notes for the Chapter:

!!!!!!! I am so sorry I've been gone for so long!!! Classes are kicking my ass!! That being said, I was blown away when I finally came back this fic and saw all the comments/kudos. I can't believe people like this story as much as they do and I really appreciate it!!

To be honest, I am annoyed that this is the chapter I'm finally coming back with- I've always had the chapter outlined here, so I'm okay with it, but I wish I had come back with a more Billy-centric chapter. He is, truly, the most fun character to write. Oh well. Sorry for all my ramblings! Hope you like it.

Steve wakes up to Max Mayfield kicking him in the side. Okay, yeah, maybe kicking is a pretty strong word for what she's doing, but she is tapping him with her foot. Repeatedly.

"Max, what the-"

"Shh," she hisses. "You need to get up. Before Billy knows you're here." She narrows her eyes. "Unless you want him to know you're sleeping outside his d-"

Steve scrambles up. Shit. He hadn't meant to spend the whole night on the floor, just until Billy fell asleep. Just to make sure Billy DID fall asleep. Apparently, Steve has been a little bit more tired than he thought. And his relationship with Billy is getting pretty weird - anyone can see that- but even he knows that sleeping outside Billy's door like some sort of sad watchdog is a little bit too far. Even for him.

Max is still staring at him with squinted eyes. "Why WERE you-"

He groans. "Not now, Max. I need coffee."

She purses her lips. “You look like shit.”

“You look like shit,” he mumbles under his breath as he heads to the kitchen, but Max doesn’t seem to care.

“Why are you still asleep? It’s, like, lunchtime. And you look like crap. I mean, have you even showered since you got here?”

Steve doesn’t respond to that.

“Have you even changed clothes?”

Steve doesn’t have to deal with this. Is he getting pretty rank? Yes. Is he doing it for HER stepbrother? Also yes, which he feels like is much more significant. He walks to the kitchen faster. Max, though, is practically stepping on his heels.

“I mean, you just LOOK-“

Nancy’s in the kitchen. Of course Nancy’s in the kitchen. Why wouldn’t she be? It’s her boyfriend’s house. But, also, Steve is realizing that maybe he forgot about Jonathan. Just a little bit.

Nancy is staring at him with wide eyes, makeup perfect, hair curled. She looks beautiful. Steve just slept on the floor, so he has to imagine that he’s also looking beautiful.

“Good morning, Steve.” Joyce hands him a cup of coffee, her eyes - and maybe he’s just projecting here- looking pretty apologetic as he mumbles a greeting back.

“Hey, Steve.” Nancy says, in THAT voice, and, yeah, Joyce is definitely looking apologetic. Steve has to fight the urge to groan. (To be honest, he doesn’t fight it very hard). Whatever Nancy is about to say, he doesn’t want to do it. Not now.

Nancy doesn’t care, though. “Steve,” she says again, a little more forcefully when he doesn’t reply, “we need to talk. About what’s going on.”

Steve starts chugging the coffee. He can feel Max at his elbow.

“Why?” Max asks with a sneer, and Steve tries to think if he’s ever even seen the two of them interact before. He can’t remember.

Nancy frowns. “Hey, Max, I just really need to have a conversation with Steve—“

“About WHAT?” Max asks, hackles raised. Steve keeps chugging coffee, ignores Nancy’s pointed stare.

Joyce clears her throat. “Max, honey, it’s okay—“

Max snorts. “I just want to know why she thinks it’s HER business—“

Steve finishes the coffee. Lays a hand on Max’s shoulder. He knows Nancy, and he knows Max, sort of, he thinks, and he doesn’t want them to fight, mostly because his neck already hurts from sleeping on the floor and he doesn’t want to add a headache to it. “I’ve got this, don’t worry about it.” He says quietly, and Nancy’s eyebrows raise. He runs his hand through his hair and winces. Max was right- he’s getting pretty gross.

“Steve—“ Nancy starts, and he holds up a finger.

“Max, how long are you gonna be here?”

She shrugs, eyes still glancing at Nancy warily. “Until dinner.”

“Okay. Good. I’m gonna go home, okay?” Max’s face falls, and he trips over his next words trying to get them out as quickly as possible. “Not ‘go home’ go home. Just go home and get clothes. Take a shower. And then come back. Go home for a couple of hours, come back as soon as I’m decent.”

Max doesn’t look convinced, but she nods. “Okay,” she whispers, and Steve puts his hand in her shoulder again, looks into her eyes.

“I’m coming back,” he says firmly. I just slept outside his door, he wants to say, I held his hand yesterday and told him I was planting my feet. There’s no way in hell I’m backing out now. But Nancy’s watching them, and so is Joyce, and so Steve just hopes Max can feel the truth of what he’s trying to say.

She nods again, sets her chin. “Good.” Her voice is normal again. “You need a shower. You smell weird.”

He rolls his eyes, takes his hand off her shoulder. Whatever. “Nancy, if you want to talk you can get in the Beemer.”

Nancy looks at Joyce as if Joyce is supposed to say something here, but Joyce just smiles.

“Fine,” Nancy says, getting up and going to the door. She doesn’t seem angry, which is good, but she does seem concerned, which is sometimes worse.

Max watches her with a frown on her face. She looks at Steve. “Don’t-“ she starts and Steve shakes his head.

“I know,” he says, and he knows she’s worried he’ll humiliate Billy, that all of Billy’s secrets will be out for the world to see. “I won’t.” And he means it.

xxx

Nancy doesn’t say anything for the first few minutes, which Steve is grateful for. She’s watching him, he can tell that, with those big Bambi eyes and a half open mouth, but he tries to ignore it. He’s trying to sort through what all can be said and not said, and figure out why he told Nancy to get in the car at all. This isn’t her stuff. And he knows it probably feels like it should be, but it’s not monsters and scientists this time, it’s something else, something that’s Billy’s and Max’s and now his and Joyce’s, and he doesn’t know if it should be Nancy’s or not. Finally, he can’t do it anymore.

“Just spit it out, Nancy.”

“Steve, what is going on!?” The question is half yelled, and her voice is already full of emotion.

He sighs. “What do you mean?”

She scoffs. “You know what I mean. I mean you showing up at Jonathan’s house in the middle of the night carrying Billy Hargrove, of all people! I mean you basically living at Jonathan’s all of the

sudden! I mean Mike getting weird -and I mean WEIRD- walkie talkie calls from Max at all hours of the day trying to talk to the people in this house. I mean me and Mike being practically banned from the house while you and Billy-“

“Woah, woah, woah.” Steve says with a laugh, and the laugh is too fake, he can hear it, and he knows what he’s saying is wrong but he just goes for it. “Is that what this is about? You not getting to have your little sleepovers with Jonathan? Because, by all means, go ahead. Who am I to stand in the way of two horny teenagers?” The words aren’t his, he thinks, they’re Billy’s. Huh. That’s interesting.

“STEVE HARRINGTON.” Nancy’s voice is sharp and cutting. “You know that’s not what I’m worried about. I’m worried about-“

“About what, Nancy? About me? I can’t imagine that’s it. About Billy? You tried to shoot him less than a month ago, so that doesn’t seem right, either.”

“Don’t get all high and mighty with me about trying to shoot him, because you hit. Him. With. A. Car. Okay?”

Steve hit Billy with a car. That seems like it should come up more than it does when he’s talking to Billy. He HIT Billy with a CAR. For good reason, of course, no one would dispute that. But it was a CAR.

“You just need to- can you- I’m worried, okay? I’m worried. We all are.” Nancy adds with much less vehemence.

We all. We all? Nancy and Jonathan. Nancy and Mike? Who is we all? “What are you worried about?” he asks, as if he hasn’t been worrying about Billy every damn second he’s been awake. There’s a lot to worry about here.

Nancy’s face softens. “About you, Steve. You’re mixed up in something big again, I can tell, and I’m worried that you’re not okay.”

Steve laughs. He doesn’t mean to, not this time, but it just happens. “Look, I’m really not the person you should be worried about, okay? I’m good. I’m fine. I’m-“

“Are you? Cause you look horrible.”

Just the words every boy hopes his ex-girlfriend will say one day. But still, the idea that anyone could look at any part of this situation and come away worried for Steve is ridiculous. It’s because it’s Billy, he thinks. They’ve been so used to hating him they don’t even think to do anything else.

“Listen, Nancy, really listen.” They’re pulling up to his house, and he can’t remember the last time Nancy was at his house. “I am good. You don’t need to worry about me. I am....” he breaks off, sees someone in his driveway. “Screwed. I am so screwed.”

Robin is in his driveway, and she looks pissed. Steve doesn’t know what he’s done, but he’s a dead man walking. He can tell that.

Robin is yelling at him before he’s even out of the car.

“HEY!” she screams, arms thrown wide. “WHAT THE FUCK?”

“Robin, what’s-“

“What’s your problem? You get tortured with a person, you fight a monster with a person, you talk about how much this stuff fucks you up, and then you just ignore me?! You don’t answer my calls? You’re not talking to me anymore?” Robin’s voice cracks, and Steve feels so, so stupid. He is, truly, a goddamn idiot. “What, you’re too-“

Robin breaks off, stares at something over Steve’s shoulder. It’s Nancy, finally getting out of the car. Shit. Robin looks at him, and he thinks her eyes look glassy, but he’s not sure.

“Oh,” she says quietly. “Is that it? You have Nancy, so you-“

“What? No! No! Robin, no, I-“ Steve groans. “Look, first off, I don’t have Nancy. And even if I did, it wouldn’t matter. I don’t even want her anymore, okay? I told you that.” He knows it’s a weird thing to say with Nancy right there, but he’s really done with today and is having problems caring. “I’m an idiot, okay? I’m an idiot. I should’ve called you. But I’m not ignoring you. You’re my friend. Honestly one of the best friends I’ve ever had, and I’m not- I should’ve called you.” This is all coming out in one big breath, and Robin’s face is only

looking more confused. “There’s so much happening right now, and I-God. I don’t know.”

“Steve,” Nancy says softly from behind him. “Maybe we should just all go inside. And you can explain.” She looks at Robin, clearly trying to assess that situation, too. “To both of us.”

xxx

Joyce has to leave to get groceries, and she hasn’t been gone fifteen minutes when Max gets the call- a walkie call from Lucas. Her mom is calling around looking for her, wants her to come home early for dinner. It’s only 4:30, so it’s annoying, but it’s not a big deal.

It doesn’t seem like a big deal.

xxx

Before she leaves, Max reassures Billy in a very serious voice that Steve is definitely coming back.

Billy is surprised to realize that he had never thought Steve wasn’t.

xxx

The girls let him take a shower first, which is nice. And then they have questions. Hours and hours worth of questions. Questions that, for the most part, Steve can’t answer.

It takes Nancy and Robin a combined hour to successfully feel out which questions are out of bounds- mostly questions about specifics, questions about what exactly happened to Billy, questions about how Billy is reacting.

What they settle on, instead, is the why questions.

Why is Steve helping Billy? Why is Joyce okay with Billy? Who doesn’t Max hate Billy anymore? Why is Steve still at the Byers if he’s done all he can? Why did Max call Steve? Why Steve? Why Billy?

Steve doesn’t really have these answers, either.

Eventually, there's a silence. Robin and Nancy are running out of questions- or, more likely, they've realized Steve has no answers. Thank God. Steve has a pit in his stomach, and it's growing, and he really, really wants to be back at the Byers.

"I'm just-" Nancy starts, then stops herself, inhaling sharply. "I'm worried about you, Steve, because you seem really wrapped up in all of this. And I know that whatever is going on with Billy's family is bad, and I don't want that, but....this is Billy, Steve. He almost killed you. He almost killed most of us. And I don't want you... I don't want you to get hurt. Again."

Steve is just so, so tired, and he doesn't understand why Nancy cares again, not when it's been months since they really talked outside of monster related business. And he already knows all of this. He knows, okay? He's not an idiot. He remembers who Billy is. But she doesn't- they don't- they don't get it. He doesn't get it, either. But it's not what they think. He looks at Robin, hoping she'll understand and of the things he's thinking, but she just shakes her head.

"Billy Hargrove is a dick." Robin says quietly. "Everyone knows that." She pauses, glances briefly at Nancy before fixing her attention on Steve. "But before this summer, I thought everyone knew you were, too. So I don't know. I trust you. I just- you've gotta be safe, Steve." She cracks a smile. "And if there's one thing I've learned about you, it's that your survival instincts are freakishly low."

Steve frowns, ready to dispute that even though Nancy is nodding in the corner when the phone rings. He almost doesn't answer it, can't imagine who it would be that could possibly be important right now, but it honestly looks like Nancy and Robin are about to combine forces against him, and the call is a way to delay that, even for just a few minutes.

"Harrington residence, this is-

"STEVE! Steve Steve Steve you've gotta come it's Billy something bad-" the kid on the other end is frantic, and nothing is making sense, and Steve's stomach is in his throat already.

"Woah woah woah Will, Will, slow down, what's going on-

"It's Billy!" Robin and Nancy are both watching him with wide eyes, but Steve is already scrambling for his car keys.

"Mom is gone, and Max called, on the walkies, and she was trying to talk to you, and she was crying, and she said it was really bad, and we didn't know Billy could hear, and oh my god, Steve, you have to do something, Billy-

"WILL!" Steve shouts, and it's like the world is closing in on him. "What did Billy do? Is he okay? What-

"He left." It's El's voice now, soft and scared, not frantic and screaming. It's just as bad. "We didn't realize he heard Max, but he left. He left and we can't find him. He's gone." She pauses, and Steve can hear his own heartbeat. "Billy's gone."

16. I Think About a World to Come

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child abuse, sort of a panic attack

Hope you enjoy the chapter!

Billy doesn't think anything about it when they find out Susan wants Max to come home early. Neil and Susan have always been weird about dinner times- this is nothing new. Max leaves him with the reassurance that Steve will be back soon and she'll be back tomorrow, and then he is left alone in the house with two of the weirdest goddamn kids he's ever met.

He can only take about five minutes of the silent staring before he can feel his skin start to crawl, and he's scared shitless that the girl is about to try to say something, so he retreats to the room as soon as he can. He can hear them talking after he leaves, and though he can't make out what they're saying, the low murmurs that bleed through the door are comforting, in a way.

He's tired -his body hurts too much for him to ever actually sleep well at night- and he would take a nap if he could just get his brain to shut up for two seconds. Every time he's almost asleep, some image or voice or thought jerks him back awake. Some of them are about Max- her quiet declarations that they're going to beat Neil, the way she looked when she first saw him after tumbling through his window. Some of them are about Joyce- the way she calls him sweetie, the time she said he would never go back to his house like she meant it. And some of them are about Steve. Their hands, together. "Because I'm a goddamn idiot" on loop. Maybe we could've been friends. But, mostly, they're about Neil.

Neil could break any of these people if he wanted to. And, yeah, Neil's never tried to break anyone that wasn't Billy or his mom before, but Billy's never done anything like this before. He screws his eyes shut, tries to push away thoughts of Max with bloody noses and Joyce with black eyes. Max like him at her age, Joyce like- no. It

can't happen, it won't-

There's something going on in the living room. The kids' tone has changed- they're frantic and hissing now, and there's the static of a walkie talkie. They're trying to be quiet, but something's wrong. He can hear it. Slowly, he gets up and cracks the door open. Max's voice comes through, loud and clear.

The whole world starts crumbling.

xxx

Neil and Susan are waiting for her in the living room, and Max can tell as soon as she walks in that something is very, very wrong. Her mom actually looks worried, actually looks scared, and Neil looks like every muscle in his body is wound tight. Max tries so, so hard to look normal.

"Max," her mother says, her voice fraught with concern, "where is Billy?"

Shit. Shitshitshitshit- she tries to look normal. Hopes her face looks the same. Prays her voice won't crack when she says: "isn't he still in his room? He's been there for ages."

They believe her. At least she thinks they do, because her mom visibly relaxes, just a little bit, and Neil's jaw stops being so tense. He clears his throat.

"It seems," he says, and how does his voice sound so normal when he looks so angry? "that Billy is not, in fact, in his room."

Max looks between the two quickly. Hopes she can keep this up.
"What do you mean? Where is he? Where did he go?"

"We, um," her mother's voice is so soft, "we don't know."

Max lets her mouth fall open. Billy has always said she was too expressive, and she's hoping that works in her favor now. "Billy ran away?"

Neil turns his back to her, as if it will keep her from seeing how

angry he really is, and her mom frowns.

“Max,” she says, “this is very important. Do you have any idea where he could be?”

“He’s probably with some girl.” Max scuffs the toes of her shoes, looks down at the ground. “It’s not like he has any friends.”

Neil looks at her again, and she wonders if this is how afraid Billy feels all the time. He’s not mad at her, she tells herself. He doesn’t know. For a second, the room is so tense she physically aches. And then, just like that, he’s normal Neil again, Neil the caring stepfather.

“Susan, I’m gonna go start looking,” he says, placing a hand on her mom’s shoulder. “Why don’t you two go ahead and pack?”

“Pack?” Max repeats, and tries not to look too relieved as Neil exits the house.

“Neil thinks it would be best,” her mom says, standing up, and Max can hear Neil pull out of the driveway, “if you and I went and stayed with Aunt Linda for a few days. Just while he’s looking for Billy. So that- well, you know. It’s a tough situation, and he’s worried, and he wants to be able to focus on Billy.”

Aunt Linda lives in Indianapolis. No. No no no- focus on Billy? Focus on- “He’ll kill him, Mom.” Max doesn’t mean to say it, but it comes out, and her mom freezes and she can feel the tears in her eyes. “If he finds him and we’re not here. He’ll kill him. You know that, right? He’ll kill-“

“Maxine!” Her mom’s voice is sharp, and she looks a little breathless. “Neil is a good man, and he-“

“He’ll kill him!” Her voice is cracking and tears are streaming and she wants, so badly, for her mom to understand. “Mom, if we go, and he finds him, he’ll kill him! He’ll kill Billy!”

“Maxine,” her mom says again, but her tone has shifted, and she looks...wary. “Do you know where Billy is?”

Goddammit. “No, Mom, no. I just- don’t you CARE?”

One look at her mom's face tells her all she needs to know. Max shakes her head, scrubs at her face with her hands. "I'll go pack," she whispers, already thinking about the walkie under her bed. She has to tell Steve. They have to know.

On the way up to her room, she pauses by Billy's bedroom. The door is broken in half.

xxx

Damnit. Damnit damnit damnit all to hell this cannot be how it ends
Steve was gone for TWO seconds-

Steve is speeding as fast as he can, flying past stop signs and getting more than a few middle fingers. He doesn't care. Shitshitshit he will not let it end like this.

He'd basically been sprinting out the door before the kids had even hung up, a quiet "go" from Robin and a "be safe" from Nancy. Screw Nancy. If she hadn't had so many questions, he would've been there, and fuck- it's not Nancy's fault. He knows that. It's his.

He never should've left Billy.

He never should've left.

He knows exactly where Billy's going, because it's the same place Billy's been trying to go this whole time, like some kind of sick homing pigeon.

Steve just hopes he gets there before Billy does.

There's some confusion on the timing of it all- how long the kids took to realize he was gone, how long they looked for him before they called Steve. Steve has no idea how long Billy's been gone- no idea whether he's already there or not.

A car angrily honks at him as he speeds past and he doesn't even look back in his rear view mirror. He knows where Billy lives, thank God, or at least he knows the street where he lives, which he hopes is enough.

God, he hopes this is enough.

xxx

Billy can see the lights of his house. He can see the lights of the house, and he can see his dad's truck, and he can't see Susan's car, which he hopes means Max isn't there but he doesn't know.

He doesn't know if Max is safe. He just heard the crying and the words "he's looking for Billy" and "it's bad" and bolted. Because this is it- the moment he's been telling them was coming- and like he's been telling them, they weren't ready for it.

Billy has to go home. He has to know that Max is safe. He has to get home before his dad finds him, because now his dad will only find him, not him and Joyce and Steve and the girl and the kid with the bowl cut and-

Billy has to know that Max is safe.

His ribs are killing him. Every step hurts.

He can see the lights of his house.

He just needs to see Max.

He can see the lights of his house-

And then there's a car screeching to a stop beside him, door flung open while the engine's still running. Steve Harrington tumbling out, eyes wild. No. No no no the whole point of this was that Steve wouldn't be there when his dad found him and it would just be him and Billy has to see Max and Steve has to LEAVE, now.

"Billy. Billy." Steve's out of breath, and he's looking back at Billy's house like he's worried it will come closer. "Hargrove, get in the car right now. Billy, get in the car."

Billy shakes his head, and there's so many voices screaming, and his ribs hurt so bad. "I have to see Max. Steve you have to leave. I have to go -you need to leave- I have to see Max-"

He's not trying to say these words but they're all falling out of his mouth and he can feel his throat closing, which is ridiculous, he can't do this right here, not now, not when he's walked all this way-

"Max is safe! Max is safe. Billy, she's with her mom. Max is fine. You have to get in the car. Billy, get in the car."

Max is safe. His lungs start working a little bit closer to normal again. Billy pauses, but it's not enough. Billy knows that. "Steve, you have to leave." His voice is clearer this time, less shaky. Good. "I have to go. I have to go, Harrington, so it'll just be me, he won't have to find me, it'll be better this way—"

"BILLY." Every vein in Steve's neck is popping out, and his eyes are wide. "Billy, get in the car. I will not let you do this. You can't go back to him, you have to come with me—"

Billy shakes his head. He can see it all with perfect clarity now. If he goes home, right now, his dad will beat the shit out of him. But if he waits, and his dad finds him, his dad will kill him, and he'll hurt anyone close enough to touch. This is it. This is what he has to do.

He takes a step forward.

xxx

For a second, Steve thinks that Billy's still flayed. His eyes are glazed over and he's not listening and he's taking a step forward, a step towards that damned house, and—

It's like holding Billy's hand. Steve doesn't know where it comes from, but it feels right and it's all he can think of.

xxx

Steve is standing in front of him now, and so, so gently, he puts his hands on either side of Billy's head. Fingers in his hair. Palms on his cheeks. Steve puts his forehead to Billy's.

"Billy," he says again, but it's a whisper this time, and their mouths are so close. "Get in the goddamn car."

This is what it feels like right before you kiss someone, Steve thinks. But he can't dwell on that right now because all that matters is getting Billy away from here, away from that house, away from whatever this frame of mind he's in is. Steve thinks he wants to kiss Billy Hargrove and none of that matters because Billy isn't safe here.

Their foreheads are still together, and this feels like the most natural position in the world. Steve feels like he was built to hold Billy like this.

"We have to leave." Steve whispers, and, oh thank God, thank Jesus fucking Christ, he feels Billy nod.

When he pulls away, there are tears in Billy's eyes, but Billy is actually looking at him, actually seeing him.

"Yeah," Billy whispers, moving himself out of Steve's hands. "Let's go."

17. Where the Books Were Found by the Golden Ones

Notes for the Chapter:

Lol sorry it's been so long. I promise I haven't abandoned this sucker, my schedule is just a lot more than it was when I started this. Here's a new chapter though!

Billy is in the car. Billy is in the car, and that's all that matters. Billy is in the car, and they're leaving, quickly, before Billy can change his mind.

Billy is in the car.

Steve thinks his heart is going to pound out of his chest.

xxx

Billy is the kind of tired where it's in his bones, the kind of tired where his thoughts are just vague hums and his whole body aches.

Billy is so, so tired. The farther away they get from his house, the more he realizes that tonight could have been the night he died, could've been the night all of this was over. He watches the lights of his house disappear in the rear view mirror and wonders what would've happened if Steve didn't show up, if Steve wasn't such a goddamn idiot.

Maybe Billy wouldn't be so tired anymore.

Steve. He's in Steve's car. Steve had just held Billy's face in his hands, and now Steve is dead silent, eyes panicked. Shit. What the fuck was Steve doing? Why did he keep coming back? Billy's mind keeps grasping at fuzzy moments, trying to make sense of a million different dots, but Billy is so, so tired, and none of this is coming together.

Tonight could've been the night he died.

There had been a moment, back there- with Steve's forehead to his

and Steve's breath on his lips and Steve fingers in his hair where Billy had thought- maybe- shit.

Billy is so tired.

xxx

Steve stops at his house first, just so he can run in and call the Byers so that Joyce knows they're safe, knows Billy's okay, instead of having to wait to see if Steve comes back or not. He remembers the terror that pulsed through him not thirty minutes ago and he knows they must be miserable, and he doesn't want to make them panic anymore.

He explains that they're making a quick stop and Billy doesn't respond, just sort of flicks his eyes at Steve and then back to the rear view mirror again. Billy hasn't said a single word, has barely moved. Steve's heart is still racing. He feels like he could run a marathon right now and still have the energy to scream at God afterwards.

When Steve goes to get out of the car he hesitates, fear gripping him, but Billy shakes his head lightly. "Go," Billy whispers, and Steve understands it for the promise it is. Billy's not leaving again.

The phone call to Joyce is quick and quiet, and he can hear Joyce start crying when he says it's okay, Billy's safe, they're coming back. When Steve hangs up, he hesitates for a second, and then calls Robin.

"It's okay," he says as soon as he hears her voice. "I've got Billy. He's safe. It's okay."

Robin makes a heaving noise. "Oh my God, Steve, what is going on, what the hell was that-"

"I can't talk right now, but I promise I will." Steve is growing more anxious every second he leaves Billy in the car. He thought he had understood the "go," but he can never be sure if he ever really understands Billy. "I just wanted you to know we're okay. He's okay. I promise I'll talk to you later."

Robin is silent for a moment, and then she says quietly: "You're my best friend, Steve Harrington. Be safe."

Steve shuts his eyes, rubs his forehead. He wishes Robin was here right now, wishes she could look at him and tell him he was an idiot and that he could pretend everything was still as simple as it was when their problems were Russians and monsters. "Love you too, Rob."

xxx

There had definitely been a moment, back there, when Steve had held him and begged him to get in the car. A look. A touch. Something. Billy wasn't making this up. That was real.

xxx

When Steve gets back in the car Billy remains silent, his eyes still locked on the rear view mirror.

They ride in silence, and Steve wonders if he's supposed to say something- something like "hey, Billy, I know we've only been on speaking terms for a week now but this is the kind of shit you can't pull again," or "if you had actually gone back I would've torn down your front door trying to get to you," or, maybe, "what the fuck, Hargrove?"

But none of those are good and Steve is still trying to make sense of what just happened, and so he's silent, too, and tries not to think about all the things that could have happened if he hadn't gotten there in time.

When they reach the Byers, Steve cuts the engine. Right as he goes to grab on the door handle, though, Billy's hand shoots out and grips his forearm.

Steve jumps, he's so unprepared.

Billy's staring him down, eyes blazing, and there's a clarity there he's been missing this whole time. His hand is like a vice on Steve's arm, but Steve can't help but feel relief. For the first time today, he feels like he's actually looking at Billy Hargrove.

“Back there. At the house.” Billy says, and his voice is rough. The porch light turns on, but Billy doesn’t flinch. His eyes are boring into Steve. “When you grabbed my face.”

Steve nods, heart going through the roof. “Yeah.”

“Were you thinking about kissing me?” It’s a question, but it’s not, because Billy obviously knows. His voice is confident and emotionless, sure and steady. There’s no point in lying.

“Yeah,” Steve says again, and he wants to say so much more, wants to say yeah, I did, but that’s not why I did it, I just wanted you to be safe, and yeah, I don’t know what the hell that was, either, and yeah, but it’s not that important, I just needed you to get in the car, and you got in the car, and that’s all that matters. His words get stuck in his throat, though, and Billy nods.

He releases Steve’s arm, eyes still burning. “Don’t ever do that again, okay?” His voice is a whisper now.

Steve stutters, still trying to say it all. “Billy, I-“

“No, Harrington, listen to me. Do not EVER do that again. Got it?”

Steve stares at him, and Billy rolls his eyes.

“Say it, Steve.”

“Got it.”

Billy nods again, and then quietly gets out of the car, walks to the porch where Joyce is already waiting.

Steve’s hands are shaking.

xxx

Joyce is so kind and so caring and Billy is so tired. She rebands him and gives him tea and barely says a word throughout it, and the kids stare at him with swollen red eyes and Billy can’t believe that he did that to them.

Tonight could've been the night he died.

Billy wishes Max was here.

xxx

Steve sits on the porch for way too long. He just can't go inside, can't look at Billy, can't look at Joyce.

Billy could've died tonight, and Steve wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing about it.

Billy could have DIED.

He lights a cigarette and then he lights another one after that, desperately trying to make a list about anything other than "Thing That Could've Happened If Just One Thing Went Wrong Tonight" and coming up with nothing. On the third cigarette, Joyce appears beside him.

"Steve, sweetie," she whispers, putting an arm around his shoulders, and he can't help it. He starts crying.

He starts crying and he can't stop, and Joyce just holds him like he's a child, whispering to him while he cries like a snot nosed brat.

Tonight could've been the night that Billy died.

18. Written in Pain

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm still alive! Sorry. Also I have so many feelings about Stranger Things announcing that Hopper is still alive, but I'm gonna be straight up with you guys and say that for the purposes of this story, Hopper's gonna remain dead. I love him and am glad we'll see him again, but his revival isn't gonna be worked into the fix haha mainly because I have no idea how that would work. Anyways. Here ya go!

Times Steve Has Thought About Kissing Another Boy:

1. He and Tommy were thirteen. Tommy called him a pretty boy loser and Steve tackled him. The thought had only been there for a second, and then Tommy had burped in his face and Steve had elbowed his junk.
2. He was fourteen, on a date at the movies with Lauren Springs. The couple in front of them had their tongues down each other's throats and the boy had white blond hair and tan arms. The girl was pretty, too.
3. Junior year, basketball game against West. West's star defense player had almost a foot on Steve, all long legs and face full of freckles. One well timed illegal hit and he sent Steve flying. He helped Steve up afterwards.
4. Tommy, again. They were very drunk. Nothing happened, thank God. Steve met Nancy the next week.
5. Last night.
6. Last night.
7. Last night. Fuck.

xxx

Billy has always known that Steve was a goddamn idiot- knew it from the first moment he saw him, arm thrown around Nancy, looking at her like she was actually worth giving up royalty. And yet, somehow, Steve constantly outdoes himself. It's like every action is, defying all belief, dumber than the last. And last night Billy had just known-had

known as soon as he came out of the fog, as soon as he could really think about what had happened—that Steve really was the biggest idiot Billy had ever met.

What did Steve think was gonna happen? He was gonna kiss Billy and all of this was gonna be okay? That Neil would disappear and Billy would be fine? That he'd kiss Billy and Billy would stop being the guy that broke his nose, stop being the guy that killed half the town? That he'd kiss Billy and they'd go off and live in sunny San Francisco and not get beaten to death?

Jesus, that idiot was really thinking with his dick.

At least Billy gets it, now. This whole time he's been trying to pin it down—why Harrington was here, why Harrington saved him, why Harrington cared. The answer was simple, actually: Billy's always been a hot piece of ass.

Billy doesn't have time for this, though. They avoided Neil for one night. He's still looking. Nothing has actually been fixed here.

Billy needs to get out. Billy needs to run. Billy needs to talk to Max.

xxx

Steve absolutely cannot face Billy right now. He could barely sleep last night, possessed by the thought that one wrong step could've led to Billy's death. He can't look Billy in the eye and know that he almost died, know that Steve barely made it in time.

And, ya know, the whole kissing thing. Billy probably doesn't even WANT to see Steve. May never look at him again, actually. Not now. God, Steve's an idiot.

Billy's still in his room when Steve wakes up, and Steve, desperate to hide, takes his coffee and runs to the porch. He just can't look at Billy, can't look at Billy without Billy knowing that Steve cried all night, and Billy doesn't have time for that, this isn't about Steve—

Nancy's sitting on the porch. Steve almost does an about-face and walks back inside, but Billy's worse than Nancy and Steve just has to pick lesser evils, he guesses.

He sits on the steps and pretends not to see her. Nancy clears her throat.

"Um, I hope it's okay" -Steve would bet his life that whatever she's about to say is definitely NOT- "but I asked Robin if she would come here today. I know you like her, and you need a friend."

...oh. Steve takes a sip of his coffee. "It's fine." It's more than fine, it's actually really nice, but Steve will be damned if he tells Nancy that.

She purses her lips, moves to sit next to him. "I came off like a bitch yesterday, didn't I?"

Steve is silent. He's being gracious.

"I don't- I don't know what all is going on here, Steve. I've been a bad friend. I was a bad girlfriend. But I do care about you. And the Byers, they...they're like family, Steve. And I care about them. And their whole life has just been bad things happening to them, and I saw Billy come in here and I got...whatever. I'm sorry, Steve. I trust you. You're an adult."

Steve drinks his coffee, remembers the Nancy with a pistol in her hand. Remembers the Nancy who fought monsters. Remembers the Nancy that fights tooth and nail to protect those close to her. "I get it, Nance. But whatever you think he is...I don't think he is. Not anymore."

She nods. "I'm starting to see that." She smiles at him, but it's shallow. "He's gotta be something good, if you're fighting for him."

They sit in silence for a few minutes, until Jonathan bounds out the front door (and holy SHIT, is it bad that Steve sort of forgot about Jonathan for a few days?) and nods at Steve and gets in his car with Nancy, and they drive off, smiling and picturesque.

Steve drinks two more cups of coffee.

xxx

Billy has had all morning to think about all the different ways last night could've played out-

He got so close to this nightmare being over. He could've stopped being afraid. He could've faced up to his dad like he was SUPPOSED to and this could all be over.

He could still do it, of course. He should still want to. But something's...different. Shifted. He's glad last night didn't happen, even though he's been so ready for it ever since he left his house. He doesn't want to do what he's supposed to anymore: he wants to run.

God, he needs to talk to Max.

xxx

Robin is the kind of good that Steve cannot even fathom being: the kind of good where she just knows what to do and knows how to do it without seeming self righteous or pitying or like she's trying too hard. She just does what needs to be done.

And right now, what needs to be done is that Steve needs to think about anything other than Billy. And so, without being asked, Robin is sitting in the porch with him, filling him in on every piece of nerd drama that he missed in high school.

Steve had no idea the geeks had that much drama. He definitely had no idea the band kids had that much sex. Like an asshole, he thought the drama was reserved for him and his friends. Apparently, though, the geeks had been having enough drama to write a play about.

Robin is in the middle of telling him the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard -apparently at one point literally none of the trombones would even acknowledge that the clarinet section even existed because Mary M. cheated on Murphy with Philip (Steve didn't even KNOW these people)- when he realizes that, if there's anyone in Hawkins he can tell about wanting to kiss Billy, it's Robin.

She must notice his face change, because she breaks off mid sentence with a soft: "hey, dumbass. What's goin' on?"

Steve shakes his head. He doesn't even know if he can say it all out loud, if he can explain last night without giving up all of Billy's most vulnerable moments, if he can explain everything without admitting

he had once thought about kissing TOMMY, of all people.

Robin pokes his arm. “Come on, dude. What’s up?”

He inhales deeply. “Last night,” he says slowly, “I...” he thinks about the look on Billy’s face, the stern command to never think about it again. “I messed up, Robin. I really messed up.”

Her face wrinkles, and she’s about to say something, but she’s cut off by Billy throwing the front door open.

Her eyes goes wide as he walks on to the porch, and Steve realizes this is the first time she’s seen him since Starcourt. It’s the first time Steve’s seen him since he told him he thought about kissing him, though, so he’s pretty sure he’s got the short end of the stick here.

Billy looks between the two of them like he literally could not care less that they’re the ones who happened to be on the porch.

“I need to talk to Max,” he says gruffly, holding up a walkie, “and the signal won’t reach.”

Steve and Robin exchange a look, and then, slowly, Robin nods. “Suzie,” she says sagely, poking Steve. “We need Dustin.”

19. Written in Awe

Notes for the Chapter:

Lol sorry my posting schedule is so off- I'm so busy now and then when ever I actually have time and energy to write I feel like I'm just writing chapters as fast as I can.

Dustin's here!! I'm trying to watch out about adding to many characters at once while also stating true to the fact that Steve would definitely be needing his friends in this moment— don't worry, though, I know it's been awhile since we've seen Max or Joyce, and I'm aware of that and will be getting back to them soon. I wanted to broaden the scope a little, though, and remember the crew outside of the Byers' house.

Hope you guys like it!

Steve has never had a sibling, and, to be honest, he's never really felt like he was missing out on anything. His friends that had siblings never seemed to like them much- Tommy was the middle child of three, with an older brother that threw him in the pool and a little sister that stole his stuff, and hanging out at his house was always kind of miserable. Nancy didn't really seem to like Mike, either—at least not when they were dating—and she mentioned her sister so rarely that sometimes Steve forgot her name. No one Steve knew seemed better off with a sibling.

These feelings were confirmed every time Steve had to participate in a family holiday- his dad fought constantly with Steve's aunts, and Steve's mom didn't even talk to one of her sisters. Steve's cousins were, for the most part, unbearable.

Steve LIKED being alone. Steve liked being just Steve. It was nice, and he had the house to himself, and he could basically do whatever he wanted all the time.

Which is why, in the wake of monsters and super-powered little girls and secret organizations and someone leaving him for Jonathan Byers, the most surprising development in Steve's life was Dustin Henderson.

Henderson is great. Henderson is amazing. Henderson is annoying and ridiculous and an idiot and Steve loves him in a way he had no idea was possible. It's like Dustin is his equal and his mentor and his ward all at the same time and sometimes (when he's drunk or tired or faced with Russians) Steve thinks the reason he never wanted a sibling is because he never could've loved a brother as much as he loves Henderson. Yeah, it's sappy as hell. But Steve has almost died so, SO many times in the last few years and he thinks he probably deserves this one weak point.

Steve knows Dustin better than he knows maybe anybody else. Which is why, as much as he wishes it weren't true, he knows that Dustin is probably the worst person in the world to help them.

xxx

Billy tried never to get too involved in Max's life. At first, this was because he assumed she was temporary. Once it became clear that she and Susan were sticking around, though, it was out of a genuine lack of care. He didn't CARE what the brat did or who she was friends with as long as she kept out of his way and didn't make trouble.

Honest, gun to his head, Billy can't name a single friend she had in California.

Hawkins fucked that all up, though. Because Max's friends weren't just her friends, now—Neil started paying closer attention, and now all of Max's friends were potential threats, a handful of bombs that could set Neil off. On top of Neil suddenly caring, Max happened to pick a handful of brats that were inexplicably tied to the one guy in Hawkins Billy was trying to dethrone.

So, yeah, he slipped a little bit and he started caring who Max hung out with. Just because he cared, though, didn't mean he was gonna learn their names.

Lizard face.

Bowl cut kid.

Cop's daughter.

Sinclair. (Not knowing Sinclair's name wasn't an option. There was a moment there when he was sure Sinclair was gonna be the one to get him killed).

The other one.

Of course, things have shifted. They have other names now, even though Billy's not sure when that happened.

Steve's ex's brother.

Joyce's kid.

The girl.

Lucas.

The other one who Billy barely even tried to kill, if he remembers correctly.

So when Steve has a quiet argument with the ice cream girl that ends in a wince and a "okay, yeah, fine, I guess we'll go get Henderson," Billy just nods and clocks that Henderson must be the other one. Long as it's not Lucas, it can't be that bad.

He's wrong.

xxx

Steve can't get five words out before Dustin is asking him a million questions at an ever increasing volume—where has Steve been? What's going on? Where is Max? Why is no one telling the party anything? Why was Steve with Max? Why was Steve with Billy? What happened last night when Max walkied and she was FREAKING out? What's going on?—and that's all BEFORE Dustin realizes that Billy Hargrove is sitting in Steve's car in Dustin's driveway, at which point Dustin just starts screaming.

"HE TRIED TO KILL YOU! HE TRIED TO KILL YOU! HE TRIED TO KILL EVERYONE AND HE ALMOST KILLED EVERYONE AND HE'S CRAZY! WHY-"

Steve shoves a hand over Dustin's mouth, looks over his shoulder to the

car, where Robin gives him a little wave and Billy doesn't even flinch. Steve sighs. "Listen, Henderson. He was flayed, yeah? And now he's not and some stuff is going on and I am BEGGING you to help us. Please. He's okay."

Slowly, he peels his hand off of Dustin's mouth, and Dustin immediately says, at a lower volume, thank God, "he tried to kill you!"

"He was flayed!"

Dustin shakes his head. "No, he wasn't! He would've killed you if Max hadn't stopped him! He's crazy, Steve!"

Steve sighs again. "That was a long time ago, you know? So much has happened and I mean, really—"

"You hit him with a car, like, three weeks ago!"

Steve throws his hands to the sky. "He. Was. Flayed!"

"Well, Will was flayed, too, and he didn't kill anyone."

Somethings drops in Steve's stomach at that, but Dustin just looks at him pointedly. Will was different, they both know it, but at the same time, neither of them knows anything. Will being flayed was different than Billy being flayed, that was sure. Steve can't think about that right now, though. "He saved Eleven, Dustin. He saved Eleven and I'm speaking for him now. Can't we just, I don't know, can't we just say that that counts for something? Anything? Come on, man, I'll take you to the arcade every day for the rest of the summer. I'll pay for your games. I'll..." Steve groans. "I'll let you teach me to play D&D."

Dustin looks behind Steve, back at the car where Robin and Billy sit. He looks back to Steve, and says slowly, like he's speaking to a child: "you're really speaking for him?"

Steve puts up a hand. "Scout's word."

"It's scout's HONOR, and you can't actually say it unless you're a scout."

“Whatever, man. I’m speaking for him.” Steve sucks air through his teeth. “I trust him, I guess. Yeah, I trust him.”

Dustin nods solemnly. “Okay then. Let’s do this.”

xxx

Billy and the ice cream girl—Robin, he knows her name—watch as Steve and this kid have what might as well be the Geneva convention in front of the kid’s house. They need the kid for something, some radio thing that will help reach Max, Billy thinks, but he didn’t ask a lot of questions. Steve just told Billy to get in the car and he did, and now he’s wondering if that’s gonna be a theme from now on—him climbing into Steve Harrington’s car every time someone tells him to.

Billy’s not sure why he’s here. He’s not sure why Robin’s here, either, even though everyone knows Steve is popular with the ladies, so maybe that’s it. He DEFINITELY doesn’t know why Steve’s still here.

He’d thought for sure when he walked out on the porch this morning that Steve would be gone, that it would be down to just Billy and Joyce. He’s told Harrington he wasn’t gonna kiss him, after all; he thinks he made it pretty damn clear that it wouldn’t ever be on the table. Surely Steve would give up and go now.

And yet here he is, in the backseat of Harrington’s car, and, from the looks of it, Steve is actually trying to convince some middle schooler that Billy’s worth helping.

God, Billy is so lost in all of this.

Robin looks vaguely amused as she watches the kid yell at Steve while Steve crosses his arms. “I can’t believe I used to think he was cool,” she says quietly, and Billy nods. Jesus, if he had always known this was who Steve was, he never even would’ve bothered with trying to compete with him.

Finally, Steve runs back to the car, gives them a thumbs up. “Okay, um. Yeah. Dustin’s in. Just, uh...” he points between Billy and Robin. “You guys gotta trade seats.”

“What?” Robin says, and Billy raises his eyebrows.

Steve rolls his eyes. “Dustin doesn’t want to sit next to Billy.” He scrunches his face, looks intently at Billy. “He says you tried to run over him one time?”

Billy smiles but doesn’t say a word. Steve looks away, thoroughly irritated.

Billy wonders if Joyce knows that he almost hit her son with a car one time; if Joyce (like Steve) knows that Billy’s misdeeds started way before he was possessed. He kind of doubts it.

He and Robin trade places, and the kid stays a solid two yards away from the car, arms full of radio shit, until Billy is securely in the front seat. When he gets in the car, the kid looks at Billy like he’s his arch rival, and says, very confidently for a kid with such a weird voice, “If you try to mess with us I’ll kill you.”

“Jesus, Dustin, chill out,” Steve whines, and Robin laughs.

The kid knees the back of Billy’s seat the whole ride there.

xxx

Billy is either really serious about needing to contact Max or he’s had an actual personality transplant, because he doesn’t even acknowledge Dustin once. Normally, Steve would think he was being an asshole, but under the circumstances, ignoring Dustin counts as a form of mercy, because even Steve is about to kill him.

He keeps kneeing the back of Billy’s seat, hard enough to make Billy flinch, and Steve is thinking about what Billy’s back looks like, about all the bruises and sores and carnage but he can’t think about it too much or he gets nauseous (even though he thinks about it all the time now). On top of the kneeing, Dustin keeps piping up with questions—questions directed at Steve that are solely about Billy:

“What happened to his face? What happened to Max? Where is she? Why is his dad looking for him? What’s wrong with him? Why isn’t he talking?”

And Steve wants to scream because he KNOWS that Dustin isn’t stupid; he KNOWS that Dustin has a clue about what’s going on and

he's being a dick. But, also, yeah. Billy did terrorize Dustin and his friends and he DID threaten to kill Lucas and apparently he tried to hit them with a car one time, so. Yeah. Steve doesn't know who's in the right here. He just answers each of Dustins question with a plea to shut up and, eventually, Dustin does.

When they pull over on the side of the road, there are still track marks from a few weeks ago when Steve tried to force his car up the hill, and all of the sudden he remembers the tightness in his throat when it felt like this hill was what stood between them and everyone he cared about dying. Robin's breathing hitches momentarily, but when Steve looks back at her she gives him a wavering smile.

"Guess we're gonna have to walk this time, huh?"

Dustin and Robin start piling out of the car, but Billy doesn't move, and so Steve waits. After a second, Billy says, in a near whisper, "That's a big hill."

"Yeah," Steve says, but he doesn't know why Billy cares, because Billy wasn't even here, and—oh shit. God. Steve's an idiot. "I'll help you up, Billy."

"I don't need help." Billy snaps, but his hand is already curled around his ribcage and, yeah, he may have walked halfway across Hawkins yesterday but that had nearly wiped him out on its own and it was all flat terrain, and, to be honest, he wasn't totally himself. Steve thinks the Billy he found last night could've been hit by a car without noticing.

"I'll help you up, Billy." Steve says again, quietly and calmly, and he steps out of the car. "You guys go up and get everything ready!" He calls to Dustin and Robin, and Robin nods, knowingly, and Jesus, how did Steve not think about this? He's the worst. He's an idiot. He wonders if he's ever actually done anything that helped Billy, or if he's always been this useless.

xxx

Billy doesn't WANT Harrington's help. He also knows he can't walk up that hill alone. But, dammit, what does it say about him that he's

afraid to walk up a fucking hill? Neil's right. He's pathetic. And Harrington already knows that, and this will just add to it, and—

He has to talk to Max. And he can't unless he lets Steve help him. And he HAS to talk to Max.

Billy inhales, cradles his ribs one more time, then gets out of the car.
“Let’s go.”

20. By a Puzzled Man Who Questioned What We Were Here For

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentions of abuse, vaguely (very vague, very brief) suicidal thoughts

Ok I know I'm posting a lot right now but the truth is the impending panic of right now has really made me realize hope much writing this fic helps me destress haha. I hope you guys are able to destress a little bit when you read it, too—I never actually thought anyone would read this when I posted it so now that people are I hope it's able to bring you some kind of enjoyment, no matter how brief.

Stay safe out there, kids

Billy has to talk to Max. He HAS to talk to Max. His ribs hurt and it's hard to breathe and Steve's arm around him is putting pressure on all the bruises and cuts and scrapes and it HURTS, but Billy needs to talk to Max.

This is his refrain: he has to talk to Max, and that's all that matters.

xxx

Billy's breathing like he's pulling a truck behind him and his face is pale. Steve's trying to support him the best he can but he just knows that Billy's body is a minefield right now and there's not a single place he can put his arm around Billy without perfectly picturing all the damage that he's touching.

This hill is an absolute bitch. Robin and Dustin are far up ahead, but Billy and Steve have been walking forever and haven't even covered much ground. The incline is steeper than Steve remembered (he was in a car last time) and it's clear that every step is killing Billy, but Billy just grits his teeth and keeps going.

There was this one time, forever ago, like really, FOREVER ago, when Billy came to practice with a bruise that mottled a good bit of his lower back, all purple and green against tan skin. When Steve had seen it, he just thought that maybe, for once, Billy would hold back a little bit in practice. Billy hadn't even faltered. And now, Jesus, Steve can't believe he didn't think to be worried, didn't think to wonder how the bruise got there, didn't think about the kind of conditioning that let someone play a basketball game with an injury like that. He can't believe he didn't watch Billy closer, didn't look to see if the blood was draining from his face, if his teeth were audibly grinding from how hard Billy was clinching them, if Billy's hands shook when he ran them through his hair. God, Steve was an idiot. The signs were always there, probably, and he just never LOOKED—

Billy slips. Steve's able to catch him, but he does it with a hand to the ribcage and Billy lets out a stifled whine and WHY can't Steve actually do anything right when it comes to Billy?

Billy immediately starts walking again, and Steve shakes his head. "Let's take a break."

Billy grunts. "Can't. Need to talk to Max."

Steve lays a hand on his shoulder as gently as he can. "You'll talk to her no matter what. You can't talk to her if you kill yourself trying to get up this hill. Just...take a breather."

Billy looks like he wants to fight, but he CAN'T, and both he and Steve know it. Slowly, using Steve's arm to steady himself, he sits down on the ground, chest heaving from the effort.

Steve plops down next to him, and he's kind of panting, too, sweating from the heat and the walk and the stress of trying to half carry Billy. Billy is sweating, too, and in awkward and stiff movements he peels off Hopper's old flannel shirt so that he's in just a T-shirt. That's all Billy wears anymore—flannels and Tshirts—which is just ridiculous given that up until this week Steve never saw him in anything that wasn't denim or skin tight (if he even bothered to wear a shirt at all). Billy's got good arms: the kind of arms Steve was always hoping he'd get one day with basketball workouts but never did. They're still littered with bruises and scratches, though, but most of the bruises

are yellow and fading and Billy's skin looks so much paler than Steve's ever seen it before and JESUS CHRIST Steve is JUST STARING at Billy's arms because he's an IDIOT.

Steve wills himself to stop looking at Billy. They're in the middle of a crisis, and this is not the time, and Billy's made it clear that there never will be a time. Steve doesn't even know if he actually WANTS there to be a time, but that's beside the point. Steve closes his eyes and wishes that, for once in his life, he could stop being an idiot.

xxx

Every part of Billy just HURTS, and it's stupid and dumb and pathetic that this FUCKING HILL feels like it's gonna be the thing that kills him. He wishes he was in his room. He wishes he was in his room on that goddamn mattress and that he had just stayed and starved to death because—no. He doesn't want that. He's not doing that again. He just has to get through this, just has to talk to Max, and then he can sleep. (Neil will still be looking, though).

God, it's too much. He tries to focus on the pain and not his thoughts; he tries to focus on this hill and the grass and the sun on his skin and not the reality of what Neil can still do to him.

Harrington is laying in the grass next to him, eyes closed like he's fucking sunbathing.

“Why are you still here, Harrington?”

Harrington opens his eyes and squints into the sun. “Listen, I’m not trying to be critical, but don’t you feel like we’ve pretty much covered this?”

Billy shakes his head. “You’re not gonna get in my pants. Told you that last night. So just...go home.”

Steve blushes for a second, but then he just looks confused and mildly alarmed. “Jesus, is that why you think I’m here?”

Billy shrugs. “We both know I’m hot stuff.”

“Yeah, but—“ and then Steve turns BRIGHT red and he stumbles over

his words. “I mean no, but—you’re so full of—SHIT.” He digs the heel of his hand into his eyes. “Not why I’m here, Hargrove.”

“Then why are you?”

“We’ve covered this, right?”

Billy swallows. “I’m serious about this, Harrington. You ever think about kissing me again and I’ll kill you.” He means it. He means it to his core.

Steve nods. “I know. Yeah, I know and- yeah. That’s not why I’m here. I’m here for...all the other stuff I’ve said before. God, listen, last night—that was weird as hell, right? For both of us, I think. It was a mistake, man. I don’t—I just wanted you to be safe. And you are. So just...yeah. Don’t worry about that.”

It was a mistake. Billy feels something like relief wash over him and something like regret but he ignores that part and focuses on the relief. Billy’s on the edge of something dangerous all the time and everything is so precarious right now and the last thing he needs is Steve pulling the rug out from under him. (And he doesn’t want to kiss Harrington, he reminds himself. There’s that part, too). This is good. The less moving parts in his life, the better.

Billy nods. They don’t ever have to talk about this again, and he thinks Steve knows that. He hopes Steve does. Steve really should just go home already, should have gone home days ago, should have never come to Billy’s room in the first place. But Steve is still here, and Steve was there last night.

Steve was there last night and he held Billy’s face and he got Billy away from Neil.

Tell him, a voice in Billy’s head says, and it sounds so much like his mom and he’s so tired that for once he just listens to it.

“If you hadn’t gotten there last night my dad probably would’ve killed me.” His voice is rougher than he thought it would be and he can hear it waver, but he just keeps his eyes fixed on his feet and hopes Steve didn’t hear it. He can feel Steve’s eyes on him, but he

keeps going. “He hates me.” He’s never told anyone that before, never admitted any of this. But Steve was there last night, and... he clicks his tongue. “So. Yeah.”

Steve is propped up on his elbow, eyes searching Billy for...something. After a minute, he gives a crooked smile. “Damn, Hargrove, was that a thank you?”

“Go to hell, Harrington.”

Steve smiles fully, and there’s that stupid voice again, echoing: maybe we could’ve been friends. ‘Cause I’m a goddamn idiot.

He tries to push himself into a standing position, and Steve scrambles up to help him. “I need to talk to Max,” he repeats, and Steve nods.

“Yeah. I know.”

xxx

Max feels like she’s been waiting for news for a million years. It’s all she can think about: has Neil found Billy? Is Billy okay?

Aunt Linda asks her a million questions about her friends and about school as well as some super passive questions about how everything is going with Neil and Billy (Aunt Linda was never their biggest fan, a fact Max had always appreciated) but Max can barely even answer them. Her mom gives her pointed looks and tries to goad her into talking more until, finally, Max tells her that she has a headache and asks to go to the guest room. Her mom must feel bad for her because she doesn’t even really protest, and Max goes to the room and lays on the floor next to the walkie talkie and hopes that someone decides to call.

They’d have to go up the hill, of course, to Dustin’s set up, and surely they wouldn’t do that unless something was really, really bad. So no one using the walkie is good news, really. But what if something really bad DOES happen and Max misses it because she’s talking to Aunt Linda about last year’s English class? It’s too risky. So Max just waits, walkie tuned into to Suzie’s channel, just in case.

She can hear her mom and Aunt Linda arguing quietly in the living

room. Linda thinks Neil is trouble and thinks Billy is dangerous and thinks something like this was only a matter of time and really, Susan, is this the environment Max should be raised in? And a year ago Max would have really appreciated this conversation. Now, though, all she can think is that if she leaves Billy will have no one. She may not be much help but she got him out of his room and to the Byers and to Steve so surely that counts for something, right?

Max counts her breathes. She wonders if they told Billy that Neil's looking for him. (They told him, right? He can't just think that Max left him). She wonders if Billy did something stupid. She thinks about Billy dry heaving into a bucket, his eyes a million miles away, bleeding and cold on the Byers' couch. She hopes they know what it means when Billy's hands shake, know what it means when his eyes go foggy. (But it took her years to figure out Billy and they've only had a few days). She thinks about Steve sleeping outside of Billy's doorway, about Joyce calling him sweetie. He'll be okay, right? He has to be.

"Come in Mad Max, this is the Scoop Troop. I repeat, this is the Scoop Troop, come in Mad Max. This is the Scoop Troop minus Erica plus Roid Rage. I repeat—"

Dustin.

"Dustin! I'm here." She practically screams at first, but then remembers her mom in the room next to her and tenses. She waits for her mom to call her, but no one says anything. "Dustin. It's Max. Do you have Billy?"

"He's here." Max's heart beats faster. If Billy's with them, it means he's not with Neil.

"Put him on," she snaps, feeling the first relief she's gotten since she got home yesterday.

There's a long pause on the other side, and then, in a gravelly voice: "Maxine."

She can't help it—as soon as she hears his voice she feels tears come to her eyes at the same time that she grins broadly. She's glad Billy

can't see her face; he'd never let her live this down.

"Billy, are you okay?"

He's okay. He's okay. He has to be, because he's with Dustin. Billy's okay. Neil hasn't found him.

"Maxine, I need you to listen to me."

"I am."

"Don't come home."

Her stomach drops. What—

"Don't come home. I don't want to see you, Maxine. Stay there." A sharp inhale on his end. "Don't come back."

21. All the Strangers Came Today

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child abuse

Here you go- hope you guys like it. Stay safe <3

No one says anything once they're back in the car. Billy is pale from exertion, and there's a tremor in his hand, and his T-shirt is drenched with sweat. Robin and Dustin sit in the back, faces grim, and Steve grips the steering wheel so hard he thinks he can feel a blister forming.

It was easier to get down the hill than it was to get up, but Billy had a hard time staying upright. Steve HATES this hill. He HATES this fucking hill where only bad things happen and where he has to listen to people assume he only wants sex out of them and where he has to wait to hear if everyone he likes is dead and he HATES hearing Max cry. He hates hearing Max cry, and, frankly, he's heard way too much of it.

Steve will never forget what Max sounded like when she screamed over what they thought was Billy's dead body. He will never forget what she sounded like when she found Billy in his room, bloody and broken. And he will never forget what Max sounded like, pleading and sobbing, over a crackling walkie talkie while no one responded to her.

No one says a word in the car. No one says a word except for Dustin, who, as he gets out of the car, turns to Steve and says solemnly, "I told you he was a fucking bastard."

xxx

Billy walks straight in the house and to the bedroom when they get back. He's clearly in pain, arms wrapped around his ribs, and he doesn't even look at Joyce.

Steve follows a second later, his cheeks red and his jaw set.

"I have to take Robin to her house, okay? I mean I don't have to, but she- I- I told her- and Billy-"

"Steve." Joyce says firmly, and he looks at her with a face that acutely reminds her that he must be so, so tired. She doesn't know what happened out there—she thought contacting Max was a good thing, thought it meant something that Billy was so determined, thought it meant something good. Steve's face tells her she was wrong.

He gestures towards the direction Billy disappeared. "I- I can't be around him right now. I'm sorry. I know I'm a bad person, I just...I can't look at him, okay? Not right now." Steve's voice cracks, and he shakes his head. "I know...I know I'm not...I know I'm a bad person, I can't."

"Steve," Joyce says again, placing a hand on his arm. "You are not a bad person. Just go, okay? Take Robin home. You're not...you're fine."

Steve nods wearily, clearly not hearing a word she's saying. He reminds Joyce of Jonathan, sometimes, something she never would've guessed before this week, something she's sure Jonathan could never see. But all the old self loathing, the exhaustion, the constant turmoil- Steve has a pretty face. He hides it all better. Joyce wants to hug him, wants to let him cry again. But Steve has Robin, and Billy is alone.

"Take as long as you need, Steve."

xxx

Steve feels sick to his stomach he's so mad and so guilty and just...God, did Billy really think Steve was just helping him so he'd get to kiss him? Steve should never have even touched his face (that was what saved him, though). What had Steve done? Was Dustin right? Was this Billy? Someone who made his stepsister cry while they all listened and then let her scream and sob without answering? Who turned off a walkie talkie without even flinching while a fourteen year old begged him to talk to her? Did Steve help Billy up that hill just so he could be the person Steve swore to Nancy and

Dustin he wasn't? (Billy is not the person they think he is, he can't be, this is a different Billy, who says his dad hates him and cries on the floor and lets Steve help him up a hill). God, how many Billys are there? Steve thinks he knows Billy? It's been less than a week and Steve has seriously considered kissing someone who once attacked a middle schooler and broke a plate over Steve's head and, JESUS, what the FUCK is WRONG-

"Steve. Steve. Steve. Dude, Harrington. Talk to me."

Robin is staring at him, and, shit, Steve's already halfway to her house.

"You okay there, Steve?"

"I shouldn't have dragged you into this." Steve says with a heave. "I shouldn't have—God, Robin, I get you mixed up in the worst stuff, and—"

"HEY." Robin slaps at his arm. "Listen! You don't get me involved in stuff, okay? I do. I chose to help you translate. I chose to look for Russians. I chose to come to your house, I chose to come see you when Nancy asked me to. I chose. I'm not. I'm the one involving myself, not you. So don't—" she laughs, but it's forced. She's worried, he thinks. "Don't think so highly of yourself."

He nods.

"Good. Okay. So. Talk to me." She instructs, her voice a bit softer.

He breathes in deeply. The sun's going down. This time yesterday he was looking for Billy. This time yesterday, he hadn't even thought about kissing anyone yet. This time yesterday, Billy still could've died.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he whispers, and he's alarmed to hear it leave his mouth, to realize how real it is. "I don't know what I'm doing, and everything is wrong. I don't know who Billy is, and I don't know who Max is, and I'm trying to help them, and I can't do a damn thing right. He just—what happened up there? I don't know what the fuck that was! And every five minutes, that's how it is. I think I've got

a handle on it and then I don't, I'm totally wrong, and he's not who he was two minutes ago, and I can never get it right. Every damn thing I do is wrong.”

“Steve,” Robin says softly, “I haven’t been here for all of it, but you’re not...it’s not all wrong. That’s clear.”

“No, you have no idea. I’m an IDIOT, Robin, a fucking idiot, and I...I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Robin presses her lips together for a second, eyebrows knit. She sighs. “Do you know how many people know I like girls?”

Steve sputters. He has no idea where this is going. “What- I- I don’t know-“

“Four, Steve. My older sister. Amber, from school. A girl I kissed at summer camp when I was fourteen. And you.”

“I-“

“Do you know why, Steve?”

“Cause you thought we were about to be killed by Russians and I was hitting on you. And we were high.”

“No. Well, I mean, yeah. It’s doubtful I would’ve told you without the Russians. But. Listen. It’s ‘cause I trust you. Because even if you’re an idiot and a jackass sometimes, you’re a good guy. And you try to do the right thing. You might not always know what’s going on, but...you’re doing your best. You always are.”

Steve sighs. Robin is so smart and so funny and so much better than him and she doesn’t even know and...ah, what the hell? “I almost tried to kiss Billy last night.”

Robin’s eyebrows shoot up. “You what?”

“I almost tried to kiss Billy last night. I thought about it. And he knows.”

Robin is quiet for just a second too long, and Steve grips the steering

wheel even harder. Finally, she snorts.

“Well, shit.”

xxx

Joyce brings Billy soup and water, and he looks at her the same way he does every time she hands him food—surprised and suspicious and sorry, all at once.

“I need to rewrap your ribs, if you’ll let me.”

He nods silently, slowly but diligently taking his shirt off. He can do it without help now, but it’s clear it still hurts him. He’s quiet as she unwraps his ribs and checks his back for infections, quiet as she rewraps his ribcage. It’s not until she’s almost done that he says, in a voice she’s never heard before:

“Are you—“ he breaks himself off, cheeks blushing, wincing.

“Am I what, Billy?”

He shakes his head, but she waits.

“Are you mad at me?”

There’s a weight on her chest, pressing and cracking. “No, sweetie, of course not—“

“They all are. You should be. I was...I made Max cry again. On purpose. I...” he shakes his head again, eyes shut. “You should be.”

She has no idea what happened up there. No idea why Steve was upset, no idea why Billy is crushed. But she can guess. “Billy, I’m not mad.”

He opens his eyes and jerks his head, venom in his voice. “They don’t...they don’t know what it’s like. The things you have to do. And I thought...I was wrong about Neil. I know now. And I- they have NO idea what it’s like.” He spits the words out, and looks at her with shining eyes and a clenched jaw. “You do what you have to.”

She nods. "I know." Her jaw juts forward and she tries to hold all the anger back, but she knows the look on Billy's face. Knows the feeling in his chest. "I know what it's like."

The fire drains out of him, and he nods, his face already softer. "I know you do."

She lays a hand on his shoulder, looks into his eyes. "I could never be mad at you, Billy. Not for this."

And, finally, Billy Hargrove breaks.

22. And It Looks as Though They're Here to Stay

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child and domestic abuse

Guys I'm so sorry my update schedule is so sporadic. I always write in spurts and then I'm like "oh I should save this chapter and post it next week so that these are more evenly spaced out" and then one hour later I'm like "I want people to read this right now." So, I apologize if you're suffering because of my need for instant gratification.

Little thing! Roughly three time now the chapter title has actually been fitting for the chapter by complete coincidence, and this is one of those times. I always feel strangely pleased when this works out.

Be safe! Let me know how you feel about it.

Billy has never been enough. Billy has never even been almost enough. He doesn't even know what enough looks like, just knows he's never come close—never been strong enough, never been tough enough, never been man enough.

Never been enough to not be scared of his dad, never been enough to get someone to stay. Never been enough to fight off being possessed by monsters, apparently, though that had hardly been a concern before last month.

Billy has just never been...anything, really. Never been good. Never been anything other than angry. He knows he's not likable. He doesn't care. He knows he's not lovable. No point in caring about that, either—if he couldn't get his parents to like him, it doesn't seem likely anyone else would. Billy is fine with all of this. He doesn't need to be enough for anyone. Billy is fine being angry, and he's fine being disliked. It works for him.

But when Joyce looks at him and says she'll never be mad at

him...well, she's the only person in the world who's ever felt that way about him. And all of the sudden he realizes that, maybe, he wishes he could be enough, just once.

xxx

There's a moment where Steve thinks about spending the night at his house. He's mad at Billy, and he's frustrated, and he has to process a, like, three hour conversation with Robin, which is just a lot more than he was ready for, and he has to find Dustin tomorrow to apologize, and he just doesn't really want to look at Billy's face right now.

He thinks about going home. He should go home. It's weird, right? That he's not sleeping at home? It's weird. Steve should go home, to his real bed, to his real house, with a pool, and his own shower, and stop sleeping on the world's worst couch. It just makes sense. Steve should go home.

Steve doesn't go home.

xxx

Steve's not coming back to the Byers'. Billy accepts this the moment Steve left. He saw the look on Steve's face; he knows what anger looks like. He finally cracked Steve, and Steve finally gets it now. Steve's not coming back.

It's okay. Billy doesn't need Steve to come back.

It's okay.

At 11:00pm, Steve comes back. And Billy, for the second time that night, realizes that he wants to be enough. He wants to try to be enough.

xxx

Steve hasn't been asleep for thirty minutes before he is woken up by someone shaking his shoulder. His first thought before his eyes are even focused is that Billy left again, and his heart is racing the moment he wakes up.

But it's not Joyce shaking him, and it's not Will or Eleven or even Jonathan. It's Billy.

"Harrington. Take a smoke with me." Steve stares at him, and Billy rolls his eyes. "You can be pissed all day and back, just come out here, okay?"

And then he walks out onto the front porch like nothing's wrong.

Steve waits for a second. He's mad at Billy—he is; even if it's the wrong thing to be. Anyone who heard Max crying like she did would be mad at Billy, especially when Max has been killing herself trying to take care of him all week. But...well, Robin said a lot of stuff. And he said a lot of stuff. And it's Billy, which means something now, even though it never did before.

Billy's already started smoking by the time Steve gets outside, and he holds the cigarette in the corner of his mouth while he offers Steve the pack. It's easy for Billy to look cool, Steve thinks. And he gets it. It used to be easy for him to look cool, too.

"You're pissed," Billy says casually as Steve lights a cigarette.

"Yeah." Steve replies, not really looking at him. There's no point in lying. He's not as angry as he was five hours ago. But he is tired. He is frustrated. He doesn't know what's going on.

Billy nods. He looks away from Steve, and Steve turns to watch him again. His face is better, a little, with his black eye faded and his various cuts and scratches turning into dark scabs. He still looks fucked up, but he's not covered with dried blood anymore, and that would help anyone. (He had been on the floor on a mattress for a week before Steve and Max got to him. He had laid there in his own blood for a week).

"Neil hates me." Billy says, and even though it's something that he's already said and something that seems obvious, Steve can tell it takes a lot for Billy to say. "He hates me, and..." he waves a hand towards his own body, ears red. "You can see what that looks like." He clears his throat. "And I- he's always hated me. My mom—"

His voice and face are so unlike anything Steve has ever seen before (how many Billys are there?), and Steve can feel it in his stomach, feels nauseous and sad and fucked up all at once. “Billy, you don’t—“

“Let me talk, Harrington. Fuck, just- I’m gonna say this shit. So shut up. Listen.” He inhales sharply, scrunches his nose and shakes his head. “Neil has never liked me. He just doesn’t. He liked my mom, okay? He did. He liked her more than me. But then, I don’t know. She liked me. She was great, ya know? And she liked me.” (Moms are supposed to like their kids, Steve wants to say. But his own mom hasn’t talked to him in two weeks and Billy had just told him to shut up). “And Neil- Neil hated that. They had fights, ‘cause of me. He stopped just getting mad at me—started getting mad at her, too. And he...” Billy jerks his head again, takes the cigarette out of his mouth and stares at it. “He would hit her. I don’t know. It was fucked up, man. And so she left.”

Steve’s stomach drops. He doesn’t know where he thought this story was going, but he didn’t want to hear this. It’s the story that makes sense, yeah, but he had still hoped this wasn’t the actual story.

“And Neil—that’s the problem, okay? He hates me. When people like me, everything just gets messed up and he hates them, too. And it’s been...Max and I never liked each other. I know that you’re all for middle schoolers and that shit and whatever, but I didn’t want Max in my house. And she didn’t want Susan to marry Neil. And, Jesus, NONE of us wanted to move to fucking INDIANA. We didn’t like each other. God, she hated me. I hated her. And it was...Neil thinks Max is funny. He thinks she’s got personality, you know? He likes Susan. He likes Max. He’s always telling me to a better brother. Always telling me to I need to have more respect. Take more responsibility.” He sneers the last few words, face contorted. “That night? When I fucked up your face? God, he was pissed. Thought he was gonna break my neck at one point. Couldn’t breathe. And it—I don’t know.”

He finishes off his cigarette, snubs it into the porch step. Steve is trying to keep his face neutral, trying not to embarrass Billy, trying not to look as sick as he feels.

“This only works when Neil likes Max, okay? And Neil only likes Max if Max doesn’t like me. And now, she....” he runs his tongue along his

teeth, worries at his lip. “I realized it last night. When I was walking there. If he knew? That she helped me? That she’s doing all this? He’d hate her. And she’s...she’s a tough little fucker, but she can’t take a beating. Not like the ones Neil gives. And it’s never just once for him, ya know? He doesn’t hit you once and never do it again. That’s what I used to think. That’s what my mom used to think. We were wrong. Once it starts, it... Max can’t come home, Steve. I don’t care if she hates me. I don’t care if she cries.” He looks at Steve, his eyes blurry and angry and exhausted. “I don’t care. She can’t come home.”

Steve tries to find words, tries to react to what all has just been said. There’s something in the air, something heavy, something real, and he knows—can feel it instinctually, can feel it in his bones—that all of this is a truth that’s never been said before.

“You can be pissed, Harrington. But do you get it? If I go home, he’ll kill me. If I don’t go home, he’ll kill Max.”

Steve can feel it, now: the inevitable truth of all of this, the hopelessness of where they’re at. “What are we gonna do?”

Billy lights another cigarette. “No fuckin’ clue.”

Steve watches him, watches his jaw tense up and his fingers tap on his leg. Steve doesn’t know who Billy is. Steve doesn’t know Billy, and maybe that’s not as important as he thought.

“I don’t know why I’m here, Hargrove.” Billy looks at him with raised eyebrows, and Steve taps his cigarette. “You keep asking, and I keep giving shitty answers, ‘cause I don’t know. But I am here. And I’m staying.”

Billy looks at Steve with a face Steve doesn’t know, and says, so softly Steve thinks he imagined it, “Good.”

23. Look Out at Your Children

Notes for the Chapter:

Warning: Mentioned child abuse

That's right, guys, three chapters in three days; also known as: I'm quarantined and putting off final papers all at the same time.

A heads up, for people who have been following the story: I think we're roughly 2/3s of the way through now, if my chapters continue to be roughly the same length. I'm starting to feel bad about tagging this fic as Steve/Billy- I never thought we would get this far and they'd only be thinking about kissing. It's just how it worked, though—the more invested I got, the more that plot line became the least important one. It's still there, I swear, and there will still be more to come, but I wanted to try to be honest about where Billy is and the kind of headspace he'd be in and whether or not he'd be able to take on anything romantic right now. I like how it's turning out, so far, but I do apologize if you feel like there was some false advertising there.

This chapter's a bit different, I feel like—you guys are getting a lot of monologues here. I hope you like it, though. As always, it was a joy to write. (Also, holy shit, the title lines up again. What are the odds?)

Max isn't stupid, okay? She knows how Billy is, how Billy can get. She's not stupid. She doesn't suddenly think that he hates her again. She had just been...caught off guard. She'd been so happy to know he was okay, and she'd thought he would be happy, too. (Maybe she is stupid). Max knows Billy doesn't always say what he means, though. Knows he'll be mean if he thinks it will scare people into doing what he wants.

Billy doesn't hate her (he can't, right?). He just doesn't want her to come home—and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why that is. (Max had known, just for a second, when Neil and Susan asked if she knew where Billy was, that it wouldn't be as hard to fall out of Neil's favor as she used to think). Billy's trying to be the good guy again, she thinks. That's what she figures, at least. She's not stupid.

But she just can't stop crying. She keeps trying, but she can't, and she's just laying in the floor like some sort of BABY, crying and crying. She doesn't want to be here. She wants to be with Billy, wants to be able to look at his face and know he's okay, wants to tell him to his face that she's not backing down. She wants to see Steve, wants to see him look at Billy with that face he makes sometimes, the face he makes that lets Max know that she's not the only person in Billy's corner. She wants to be with Joyce, who never makes her feel childish and always listens and never pretends nothing's wrong. She wants to be with Lucas. She wants to be with El. She would even take Mike at this point. She just wants to be in Hawkins.

She wants to be in Hawkins, and she wants to be in California, with no monsters and no Russians and no Neil (but Billy would still be with Neil, even in California). Even when Neil was there, though, when Billy was there and he was awful, California was...it was bigger. They could breathe there.

She'd never wanted to move. Billy'd wanted to even less. He'd screamed at her when they found out, told her it was her fault, and she'd screamed at him, too, told him he ruined everything. Told him she hated him. He'd screamed it right back.

Hawkins was...Billy had always been awful. But Hawkins made him worse. Hawkins made them all worse—it made Billy angrier, made Neil crueler, made her mom quieter. (It made her angrier, too. Put this feeling in the pit of her stomach that made her feel like Billy, made her feel like her dad).

She made friends, though. People she liked. People she loved, even if she couldn't say it. She got a BOYFRIEND. But Billy...she and Billy started to get better, yeah. She wasn't scared anymore, and he took her seriously, and they were better. But Billy was getting worse. He couldn't breathe in Hawkins. He never actually smiled—he smiled to

get stuff, smiled so women would flirt, smiled to be cruel, never because he was happy. He wasn't...she thought he would run away, eventually. Thought he would have to. And she kind of thinks he was planning on it, even though they've never talked about it. She thinks he was going to leave for college and just never come back. Just so he could breathe.

And then there had been even bigger monsters and horrible, horrible things and they were all going to die and then they had lived and then Neil had almost killed Billy, anyways, and now Max doesn't know what comes next.

She just wants to make sure Billy gets the chance to breathe again.

After she's cried so much she's sick to her stomach, she does something she hasn't done since her mom married Neil: she goes to her mom's bed. Her mom isn't there; she's still talking to Linda—Max can hear them, laughing about some high school memory—and Max wonders why she's the only one who understands the danger Billy is in, the only one who cares that he may not even live long enough to run away. Max has come damn close to losing Billy too many times now, and she just wishes, that, just one time, there'd be someone to cry with her about it. (If Billy knew how much she'd cried about him in the last month he'd tell her she was pathetic. He'd call her a whiny little bitch, probably. He'd tell her he'd killed people—cry over them, instead).

Her mom finds her, eventually. And, for once, her mom doesn't tell her to stop. She just crawls in bed with Max and holds her, and then Max starts crying all over again, and her mom brushes her hair with her fingers while Max sobs.

Eventually, when Max has nearly cried herself to sleep, her mom says, in a low voice: "I...I had no idea what they were like, Maxine. I knew...Neil told me Billy was trouble, told me it was hard to parent a kid whose favorite parent had abandoned him. And I...I sympathized with that. But I didn't know...I didn't know what Billy was really like. Didn't know how angry he was. Didn't know how he talked to Neil, didn't know how he'd treat you. And I didn't..." she sighs, presses her lips to Max's forehead. "I knew Neil could be angry. But everyone gets angry with their children, sometimes, and Billy had so many

problems, and I...I didn't realize. What it was all like. And then it was too late, and we were married, and Neil...he's so good to us, Max."

"Mom--" Max starts, voice cracking, but her mom shakes her head.

"It's not enough. I know. And I never would have...I did so much to try to get you away from angry men, do you know that? I didn't want you to grow up around angry men. And now...now, Max, all I can think about is how much I've failed you."

Max sniffles, and her mom is looking teary, too, and Max feels like everything in the world is wrong. "I know Billy used to be...I know I used to hate him. But I don't anymore. And he...Neil could kill him, Mom. Neil might kill him."

Tears start running down Max's mom's face, and she hugs Max tightly. "All I ever wanted to do was keep you safe."

Max pulls away from her mom and pretends not to see how hurt her mom is, pretends not to notice how much her mom needs her. "I'm safe, Mom. But Billy's not. And he- his mom didn't keep him safe. And neither did his dad. And he- he needs us."

"The safest thing for you is to just stay here, and let them--"

"Mom!" Max yells, and her mom flinches. "It's safest for us, but Billy-we HAVE to go back, we HAVE to. He cannot be alone in that house if Neil finds him, he'll die, Mom, Neil will--"

Her mom looks at her, understanding setting in. "I knew you knew," she whispers. "I knew you knew where he was."

There's a dull roar in Max's ears, and she feels her stomach bottom out. "Mom, I don't, I--"

Her mom shakes her head. "I knew he couldn't have left on his own, knew you...you're like your dad sometimes, Max. You don't sit quietly in the background."

"You can't--" Max is going into a full on panic, and all she can think about is Billy. If her mom tells Neil, and Neil calls her friends, it's just a matter of time before something-

Her mom takes both of Max's hands in hers. "I'm not going to tell Neil. We're just going to stay here, with Linda, as long as we can. We can- we don't have to be involved, Max. We can let them work this out."

"But MOM." Max is trying not to scream, but it's hard, and she feels so useless and so angry and so scared all at once. "BILLY. Billy needs me, needs us, needs someone-"

"You're my daughter, Max, and this time I'm going to protect you, I-"

"Who's gonna protect Billy?"

Her mom looks at her like her heart is breaking and Max feels a full body shiver run through her. She rips her hands away from her mom, scrambles back from her. "I hate you," she whispers, but her mom just nods.

"You'll be a mom, one day, and you'll understand-"

"Billy needs a mom! Billy needs someone! Billy needs- he could DIE and it's YOUR fault and I HATE you!" Max stops trying to not scream. "I HATE YOU! YOU'RE GONNA KILL BILLY! You married Neil and you moved us to Hawkins and now you're just gonna let Billy die and you- I HATE you!"

Max's mom is sobbing, now, but Max doesn't care, she just has to get out, has to get away, has to find a way back to Hawkins. She runs out of the bedroom and down the stairs and tries to block out her mom's face and tears and-

She runs straight into Aunt Linda. Linda has to grab her to keep from falling over, and her eyes go wide as she looks at Max, puffy and tear streaked. She glances up the stairs, where Max's mom can be heard crying, and looks back at Max, mouth twisting. "Well," she whispers, and she looks like she understands something, understands something maybe even Max doesn't. "I think we should go on a walk, don't you?"

xxx

Billy wishes Max was here, which is bullshit, because there's also

nothing he wants less than for Max to be in the vicinity of Neil. It's selfish, okay? He knows that. And it's bullshit. But yeah. He wishes Max was here.

He wishes Max was in on this, wishes his last interaction with her hadn't involved him ignoring her while she cried. He wishes...that was probably his goodbye to Max, he thinks. That was goodbye. Him being an asshole, her crying. If everything works out, if he gets what he wants, if he gets to leave and Max stays away...it's fitting, probably. That their last interaction is a bad one. They've had like, what, three good interactions, total?

Max will hate him forever if that was goodbye. And that's fine, Max can hate him all she wants. He's just trying to be enough here.

He and Steve stay up talking all night. He hadn't...he hadn't meant to tell Steve everything. Shit, there's a lot he still hasn't said. But he had just wanted, this one time, for Steve to get it, for Steve to understand that he was trying, here, he's just trying to be enough.

And when he had told Steve all of it, told Steve more than he had ever told a living soul, Steve had just taken it, and said, once again, that he was staying.

Billy doesn't get Steve. He never has. He doesn't think Steve gets Steve, if he's being honest. What is it he's always saying? That he's a goddamned idiot? It's true, clearly. And however stupid Steve is, Billy's worse, 'cause he keeps buying into it, keeps hoping Steve will come back. And Steve keeps coming back.

It's this cycle of idiocy, this thing Steve and Billy have going—there's no reason for Steve to stay and there's no reason for Billy to hope he does and yet here they are, two dumbasses, sitting on a porch that neither of them own and smoking a whole pack of cigarettes.

Steve talks, too. He says he's staying and then he smokes a cigarette and a half in silence before he opens his mouth and says, in words that run over each other:

"Shit, Hargrove. I have no idea what I'm doing. That's what I was telling Robin out there. And I-I never know what I'm doing. I used to. Back in high school. It was all so easy, you know? Hawkins is...it's

not hard to be successful in Hawkins. It's not hard to know what you're supposed to do. And then I met Nancy, and I just did everything I was supposed to do to keep her, but I fucked it up, and I didn't get into college, and...I never know what the fuck I'm doing Hargrove. And I...you ever get those moments, when you're playing basketball? Where everything lines up and you just get it? Like, you know where everyone is without looking, you know what you have to do to be perfect, but you don't even have to think about it, it just happens. And you're right, every time. You never have one of those moments and it end up being wrong, you know? I just...I never get those anymore. Recently, it's like I only get those moments when I've got a baseball bat and a monster to beat up and it's the right thing to do because it's the only thing I can do. But, this last week...every time I've thought about backing out I've had one of those moments. And I've known I had to stay. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, Billy. And sometimes, when...But it's the right thing. It's gotta be. It wouldn't...you think I'm batshit, don't you?"

Billy realizes that he's been staring at Steve with his mouth half open. He clamps it shut, runs a tongue over his teeth. "Fuck, Steve. I didn't know people got that feeling when they WEREN'T playing basketball."

Steve looks at him with wide eyes. "Really? You don't get those?"

"I used to, back when I surfed. But not...not like that."

"You just never know what to do?"

"I mean, when that thing- the monster thing- when it- there's a shiver running down Billy's back, but he ignores it. "You know. Then I always knew what I had to do, all the time, cause it told me. But not... I don't know, man. I just do whatever won't kill me."

Steve is watching him intently, searching his face for something that Billy doesn't have. "You saved El. In the mall."

Billy shook his head. "I didn't...you guys have no idea how many people I killed. Helped kill. I don't know. I...I didn't know what I was doing. I was just trying to do something that might make it stop."

Steve sighs, runs a hand through his hair. “Whatever it was, it was fucking brave. And you-God, I thought you were dead. And do you know- when I hit you with the car? I didn’t even check to see if you were breathing. And you- God, I thought you were dead then. I thought you were dead last night. I- you gotta quit almost dying on me, Hargrove, it’s making this whole rivalry thing really hard.”

Billy can’t help but laugh. “You wish you could have a rivalry with me, Harrington. Wish you were half the shit I am.”

Steve snorts. “Get your act together, Billy. One minute you’re talking about a death wish, the next you’re talking about what hot shit you are- how the hell am I supposed to know if we’re fighting or not?”

“We’re always fighting, Harrington.”

Steve laughs back, and, Billy’s smiling at him, and, God, this is what Steve’s gut is telling him to do? Steve thinks his only right option is to stay? Billy’s never...the right option is never to stay. He knows that. Staying has never worked for anyone. But...Joyce says she’ll never be mad at him, and Steve says he’s gonna stay. Billy shouldn’t...things work out better when people don’t like Billy. It’s just the way it goes. But he’s selfish, still; he’s always been full of bullshit.

It’s better when people don’t like him.

It’s safer when people don’t like him. But this- it’s bullshit. But it doesn’t feel half bad.

24. See Their Faces in Golden Rays

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mention of child abuse, use of a couple of homophobic slurs, something that could maybe be read as internalized homophobia

Here you go, guys. I hope you like it! Thank you all for reading

They stay up talking longer—stay up way too long for two people who are both bone tired all of the time now. Steve can't help it, though. It's like this confession from Billy shifted something, something deep inside him, and he wants to tell Billy shit now, even though he's now sure (more than ever) that he has no idea who Billy Hargrove is. The more Billy says, the more Steve realizes he doesn't know the person beside him at all, but, for some reason, he's fighting this urge to bare his fucking soul. It's like...Steve doesn't know what it's like, but damn, it's inconvenient.

They talk about random shit—basketball, music, cars, how much Tommy's weed sucks. Billy talks about California like it's heaven, talks about the beach like Steve's mom talks about the Hamptons.

(“Have you ever been to the beach, Harrington?”)

“Yeah, we went to Disney World.”

“Oh my fuckin'- listen, fuck that. You don't know anything till you've seen the Pacific. You ever surfed?”

“No.”

“Fuck that.”)

Billy questions—like Tommy did, like Robin did, like every damn person did—why Nancy was the one that locked Steve down, and Steve struggles, just like he always does, to find the words to explain that Nancy isn't what anyone thinks she is.

(“I mean, Jesus, Hargrove, you act like she's this priss, but I don't know if you remember that she tried to shoot you.”)

“Lots of people want to shoot me. ‘S not that special.”)

They talk about Billy's car, and Steve can remember seeing the car that first time with perfect clarity, can remember seeing the car pull up and the way the engine sounded and the way the music blasted and the way Billy looked like trouble from minute one.

(“You know I had the best car before you showed up?”

“I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Listen, the Beamer is a class act-“

“Jesus, you’re such a pretty boy. The Camaro is-“

“-the Camaro WAS.”

“Shut the fuck up, just let me mourn the damn piece of shit.”

“Did you see the Cadillac?”

“The Cadillac?”

“I hit you with it.”

“Shit, I was a little preoccupied, you jackass. I was getting hit by a car.”)

Steve feels like...well, he had said one time that maybe he and Billy could've been friends. This is what that would've felt like, he thinks. (He's not sure that they're not friends now, except Billy has said they're not. He wonders what the hell they are).

Right when the sun is starting to come up, and Steve is realizing that, oh, shit, they're gonna be tired for the rest of their lives, Billy says, quietly:

“Your parents don’t like you, do they?”

Steve fights back the urge to protest immediately, some old knee jerk reaction to explain that his parents are really busy and really successful. He shakes his head. “They don’t NOT like me,” he says, and he’s thinking about Billy’s room, Billy’s back, Billy’s mom, who apparently just fucked off to wherever. “They just don’t...they’re not my biggest fans. They weren’t happy about the whole college thing, if that’s what you’re asking.” Even as he says it, he feels like such a spoiled asshole, as if being left alone in a big house with a pool is any sort of actual problem. He knows it’s not; knows the idea that a dad who is disappointed his son is an idiot would be a welcome relief compared to a dad who...whatever. “They’re not bad parents. They love me.”

“But they don’t like you.”

“Jesus, I don’t know.”

Billy nods. “I figured. I mean—first off, I wouldn’t like you if you were my kid. But...” he shakes his head. “What do you think it’s like?”

“What?”

“What if our parents were like Joyce?”

Steve feels so much shit at once it’s hard to think. He had used to feel bad for Jonathan, back when they were friends—bad that his house was shitty, bad that his family was crazy, bad that his mom worked at the General Store. And now—Steve was an asshole back then. He knows that now. Joyce held him while he cried, even though he was an adult and a man and had a lot less going on than she did. Joyce let him sleep on her couch every night, didn’t question why he couldn’t go home. Joyce didn’t back down when everything went to shit; Joyce didn’t say they should let other families deal with their own problems. Joyce called Billy sweetie.

“If Joyce was my mom,” Steve says, “I never would’ve been King Steve. And I probably never would’ve been such an asshole.”

Billy laughs. “You never would’ve been Jonathan. Not with that face. But, I...” he shakes his head again. “Joyce. She...Neil could kill her.”

Steve’s stomach drops. “Would he? I mean, she’s a—“

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t know. If he finds me here, he could get- he gets mad. Real mad. It’s like...he seems normal. But then...I don’t know what he would do.”

And Steve knows exactly what he means, because Steve’s seen Billy do it. He’s seen Billy go from annoying asshole to downright terror in two seconds flat, and he’s been sure that Billy was about to kill him before, he’s passed out while Billy whaled on him and been surprised when he woke up alive. He wants to forget it, wants to never think about Billy in that context again.

Billy licks his lips, cracks his knuckles. “Joyce, she- I’m not gonna be a bad thing that happens to her. She’s already...” his ears turn red, and he shuts his eyes. “I don’t know what to do, man.”

Steve nods, adds Joyce to his list of people they have to figure this out for. They have to protect Max. They have to protect Joyce. He has to protect Billy.

Billy looks at him, his jaw set. “I don’t even know why she likes me. I mean, I tried to-“

“Me too.” Steve says, shaking his head. “I was- I was horrible to Jonathan. A real asshole. I mean, I’m just her son’s girlfriend’s ex, who broke his camera one time. And, yeah, there’s been stuff in between, but- I don’t know why she likes me, either.”

Billy nods. “I know I need to go home, so that Neil won’t find me, won’t know I’m at this house, but...”

“He’ll kill you.” Steve says, throat constricting, and Billy nods.

“You can call me a coward all you want, Harrington, but I don’t...” Billy’s ears turn red again, and Steve feels a wave of relief. Billy doesn’t want to die. Billy doesn’t want to die, and, honestly, that feels like a victory. “I don’t know what to do. Because he will- he’ll find me. I don’t know how he hasn’t yet. It never- it never takes him this long.” He lifts an eyebrow at Steve, gives a half-assed grin. “You getting any of those premonitions of yours? Telling you what to do?”

“What if we killed Neil?” Steve says it lightheartedly, but he’s horrified to realize how much he likes the idea as he says it, how much it feels like the right choice. (And then, all of the sudden, he’s not horrified at all. He hates Neil.)

Billy snorts. “Don’t want to do a life in jail, either, and trust me when I say no one would doubt it was me.”

Billy’s right, of course. But Steve wishes he wasn’t—he thinks about all of the horrible tragedies of the last few years, all the Barbs, the Heathers, the Bobs, all of the things that make him feel so guilty he feels like he’s choking. He wishes, just once, it could’ve been a

Hawkins citizen who deserved it.

Steve has no fucking clue what to do. He won't let Joyce get hurt; he won't let Billy go back to his house. They have to keep Max safe. He doesn't...he wishes he had an instinct right now. Wishes he knew what to do. He can only think of one thing, and it's not even something that will help, it's just...the right thing to do. Shit.

xxx

Steve clears his throat, looks up at the sky, looks down at his feet.
"I'm gonna hold your hand, Billy."

Billy hopes he's hallucinating. "You're gonna what?"

"Shut up, just- hold my fucking hand."

"Did we not talk-"

"Dude, there is nothing less sexual in the world. Just give me your fucking hand." In thirty seconds, Steve has gone from sounding quiet and confused to downright authoritative, and Billy is so lost that for a second he thinks 'ah what the hell' and holds his hand out, eyebrows raised.

For a second, for the first time in days, Billy stops worrying about Joyce and Max and stops thinking about Neil because Steve Harrington is holding his hand. They've held hands before, that one time, but that time Billy had been crying and there had been saltwater in his lungs and this time there's nothing, just a stillness and a quiet and the sunrise. Steve's hands are soft, which makes sense, because he's been scooping ice cream in a sailor uniform all summer. Billy can still feel remnants of the old workout callouses they all have at the base of their fingers and the creases of their knuckles, but Steve's aren't as rough as Billy's; his hands don't feel like sandpaper.

This is, by far, the dumbest thing Billy's ever done. But he just stares at their hands intertwined and when he looks up, Steve is staring, too. Steve runs his thumb over an old scar Billy has beneath his ring finger, from when he was seven and he tripped on the beach into a

broken bottle. He stares so intently at Billy's hand that Billy feels the need to pull his hand back and hide it, feels like he should just walk back inside now.

If Neil saw them, Billy'd be dead. And it wouldn't matter, that Billy would never kiss Steve or never fuck him or that Steve seems to be okay with that. Because this would be it—this would be confirmation of all the worst things Neil thinks about Billy, that he's a fag, that he's a pussy, that he's everything Neil hates. Billy almost doesn't care, though. Almost.

He tries to remember how to talk. "Jesus, Harrington, are you gonna read my palm and tell me my fortune or what?"

Steve looks up at him, eyes bright. "Don't be a goddamn idiot, Billy." Something inside the house moves and there's the sound of a door shutting, and Steve and Billy pull their hands away quickly, Billy's heart pounding and Steve's eyes wide.

They look at each other for a second, and then Steve says, voice confident: "I think I have an idea."

xxx

Joyce is not a praying woman, and she's not a judgmental one. But when she wakes up at dawn to voices on her porch, and she looks out, well-

Steve is looking at Billy's hand in his like it's the most precious thing in the world, and Billy is watching Steve with his mouth half open and something touchably soft in his eyes. And this is Billy, hurt, shattered Billy who sobbed in her arms last night when she told him she would never be mad at him; and it's Steve, Steve who told her yesterday that he knew he was a bad person, Steve who cried once he knew Billy was safe. She can't help it- she backs into a door trying to get out of sight, and the boys rip their hands apart, and, for a second, they both look so scared. These two boys, who are both so convinced that they're hated, and-

Joyce sits at the table in the kitchen, makes a cup of coffee and holds it firmly. She wants to pray, though to what, she's not sure. She

wants to talk to Hopper. She wants to know that she can keep these boys safe forever, wants to know that Billy will get to be loved, wants to know that Steve will get to be happy. She wants- God, she wants them to stay here forever, wants them to just stay safe and happy and with her. She's not sure what she just saw; not sure what's going on. But she knows the look on Billy's face, knows the look on Steve's, even if they don't know those looks themselves. She wants them to be safe, wants to hold them both and tell them she loves them, wants to be the parent it's becoming obvious neither of them ever had.

"Hop," she whispers, and she knows she's going crazy. "What the hell do I do?"

And then she realizes that she knows what to do, that she's always known what to do. It's the very thing Hopper didn't want her to do, but now... this is it. This is what has to happen.

The front door opens and both boys appear in the kitchen, dark circles under their eyes. Good Lord, they didn't sleep at all. They don't know she saw them hold hands, she realizes with relief. They don't look nervous, don't look scared. They don't know she saw.

They look at each other silently, and then Steve clears his throat. "Good morning," he whispers, and Billy mumbles the same. They're clearly trying to hide something, and she wishes she could tell them that she knows, that she saw the looks on their faces as they watched each other and they don't have to hide it from her.

She needs to talk to Billy, but she needs to talk to Jonathan and Will and Eleven first. Tonight, she tells herself. She'll talk to Billy tonight.

25. Don't Kid Yourself

Notes for the Chapter:

Warning: couple of homophobic slurs, something that may be interpreted as self internalized homophobia

Here is what Aunt Linda says:

She asks if Max is safe. (Max says yes which has always been true before but suddenly feels precarious now).

She asks if Max's mom is safe. (Neil loves Max's mom).

She asks if Max remembers, really, why they had to leave her dad in the first place. (Max does, even if no one thinks she does. She knows her dad was mean, okay? She just can't imagine that he was worse than Neil).

She asks if Billy's ever hurt Max. (Max lies. Aunt Linda can tell).

At the end of it, Aunt Linda looks at her and her face looks like Max's mom's when Max falls off her skateboard or Neil yells at Billy at the table. "You know you can talk to me, right Max? I'm in your corner. I don't- your mom's my sister, Max, but I'm on your side. Your mom and I both want for you to be safe."

And Max nods, and she's grateful. She is. She just wants for someone to want Billy to be safe, too.

xxx

In the first iteration of the plan, they don't tell anyone. This seems logical, at first, because the plan came to Steve like a vision while he was holding Billy's hand and who was he to question it, really? About two seconds after it's out of his mouth, though, Steve realizes that his idea may not be as solid as he had assumed. (Maybe it's not actually an idea at all, something in the back of his mind says, maybe it's just a wish, a wish born out of how rough the callouses on Billy's hand were and how tan Billy's hand looked in his and how many tiny scars

and freckles marked Billy's skin. Steve drowns that voice out).

Billy likes the idea, but Billy likes anything that he thinks helps ensure Max and Joyce's safety. That's why he doesn't want to tell them, at first—he'd rather people be confused than people be endangered. Two minutes in, though, Steve realizes that if they don't talk to Max and Joyce first, it's possible they'll get scared and do something risky anyway. It takes him a few minutes, but he brings Billy around. They have to talk to Max and Joyce, and they have to do it soon, and dragging Billy back up that hill just does not seem wise right now, so Steve has to talk to Max while Billy talks to Joyce, and then everything will be good.

This will work. This is a real plan. This will save Billy.

Steve can barely look at Joyce, he feels so anxious. And Billy's no better- God, is Billy even going to be able to talk to Joyce? Steve's not convinced. He can't even blame him, really. Just last night—no, just an hour ago, actually—he and Billy were openly fantasizing about what it would be like for Joyce to be their mom and now he expects Billy to, what, be completely calm while he throws it back in her face?

(Billy isn't gonna throw it back in her face. They're doing the right thing. This is a real plan. This is what saves Billy.)

Steve's gonna need Robin and Dustin again (actually, he really just needs Dustin, but he wants Robin to be there, too), which is kind of unfortunate, since it means he's gonna have to convince Dustin AGAIN that helping Billy is a good idea. And Steve wants to see Robin, but so much was said last night (before he even spoke to Billy, before that whole six hour conversation) that he still hasn't thought through, and he hopes she isn't going to press him on any of it.

("What do you think it is about Billy that made you want to kiss him?")

"I don't know, it just felt... I wanted to."

"Do you think that's fair to Billy?")

God, Robin's gonna kill him. Dustin's gonna kill him. It feels very possible that the spirit of Max will physically manifest through a

walkie talkie so she can kill him, too.

This is okay. This is a good plan. This is what saves Billy.

xxx

Steve looked at him with these eyes and said “I have an idea,” and Billy had just thought yeah, okay, this is it, because Steve’s eyes looked like that and his hand was warm and Billy had just told him things he’d never thought he could say before.

Billy knows as soon as Steve’s left the house that, actually, Billy is an idiot. There’s something in Steve that triggers just absolute stupidity in Billy, and Billy...

Steve’s plan could work, though. (Could it? His dad’s voice asks. Or is Billy just desperate?)

Steve’s plan is the only one they have, and it’s a plan that saves Max, a plan that protects Joyce, a plan that doesn’t end up with Billy dead. The problem with the plan, of course, is that it doesn’t protect Steve. Billy can work that out, though. He can fix that. This is doable.

(He should be the one to talk to Max, but he can’t, and someone needs to talk to Joyce. Max will never forgive him, and that’s okay.)

Joyce looks at him like she knows something, like she’s on the verge of tears the second Steve leaves. Billy clears his throat. It’s just the two of them in the kitchen, and Billy taps his fingers on the table.

“I need to- Steve and I talked. And we think- He and I are going to- I’m sorry, it’s just-“ none of these words are coming out right and Billy doesn’t know why. He made Max cry just yesterday; why is it so hard to look Joyce in the eyes and tell her goodbye, too? This should be easy. This should be normal. Billy’s starting to feel like he can’t breathe. “Steve and I, we- I- the two of us are- I need to tell you-“ shit, his throat is closing up. What happened to him? How is this the person he is now? (Joyce said she would never be mad at him; Joyce hugged him when he cried.) “Me and Steve-“

“I don’t care if you’re gay, Billy.” Joyce says it all in one breath and then claps a hand over her mouth as if she surprised herself, as if she

had said something she wasn't supposed to.

All of the air leaves Billy's lungs. "What?" he hisses, and Joyce shuts her eyes with a pained look.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to- I don't care if you're gay, Billy. You and Steve are both wonderful people, and I- you don't have to be afraid to tell me, I'm sorry-"

There's a dull roar in Billy's ears. He can feel all the blood rushing to his face and he can't tell if he's angry or scared or humiliated. "I'm not a fag," he whispers, and Joyce looks horrified.

"Billy, no, I-"

He stands up a little too quickly, and he can feel his heartbeat in his throat.

"Steve and I are nothing."

"I'm so sorry, Billy, I thought you were trying to tell me..." she trails off, waves her hand in the air, her mouth clamped shut. She's not angry, he realizes, and she's not upset with him. But she's right, isn't she? He sees it all so clearly through her eyes- he can't stay up all night with Steve and make the kind of plans they're making and hold Steve's hand and know that Steve wanted to kiss him (it was a mistake, though) and act like there's nothing wrong with it, act like he's being anything other than a dumbass.

He shakes his head. "I'm not a fag," he whispers again, and he thinks about what would happen if his dad knew he held Steve's hand, what would happen if he and Steve actually did Steve's idea. He would die. Steve could die. God, Billy's an idiot. He looks at Joyce and realizes how futile this all is, how dumb he's being.

She has tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Billy. I didn't mean to assume."

She didn't assume; she just read the fucking room. Billy has never felt more humiliated in his life.

He looks at the ceiling, looks at his feet. He's wearing someone else's clothes, for fuck's sake. What, he just goes to someone else's house

and wears someone else's clothes and pretends he has a different mom and holds a pretty boy's hand and acts like he can be something he's not? He can't...he wants Steve to stay. He wants Joyce to like him. It doesn't matter, though. Joyce thought he was in love with Harrington. And he can see why. He's an idiot.

"What were you trying to tell me?" Joyce asks softly, and he looks down at her. The plan won't work.

"Nothing," he replies softly. "Steve and I thought we had an idea, but... we were wrong."

Billy is gonna have to do this without Steve. That's all there is to it.

xxx

Dustin whines the whole way there. Billy's an asshole, Billy sucks, Billy is going to kill Steve in his sleep—all the usual complaints.

Steve wants to justify himself to Dustin, and he wants to have the words to explain to Dustin that, yeah, Billy's an asshole, but there's a lot more than that, and there's a lot of versions of Billy that no one sees, and Steve is starting to see some of them, and maybe none of this has ever been as simple as they thought it was.

He can't figure out the words, though, mostly because he's trying to figure out what he's going to say to Max, what he's going to tell Dustin and Robin. He considers not telling them, just letting them find out when he tells Max, but it doesn't seem fair, and it doesn't seem right.

When he parks the car at the hill, he takes a deep breathe.

"Listen, guys, there's something I have to tell you before we go up there."

Robin raises an eyebrow, and Dustin makes some inane comment about how oh, Steve actually can still speak, but Steve just closes his eyes.

"When I get up there, and we talk to Max? I'm gonna tell her—"

“That Billy’s a bitch?”

“Shut up, Dustin. I’m serious.” Steve taps the steering wheel. “I’m going to tell Max that Billy and I talked it over, and we decided the best thing to do is run away.” He breathes in. “Both of us. I have a car, and money from Scoops, and...yeah. We’re gonna leave. Tonight.”

For a horrible moment, no one says anything.

And then they both start screaming at him.

xxx

New plan: Billy runs away alone. He should have done this one awhile ago, but he had been stupid, and when Steve looked at him with dumb eyes and said “I want ya to go. Together. No funny business, I swear, but- you’re not safe here. And I’m not leaving you,” Billy had wanted to believe that this was a real plan that could work.

But Joyce is right. There’s getting to be something between him and Steve that’s just a lot more complicated than Billy would like for it to be, and even if they run away, it doesn’t mean Neil won’t find him, and protecting Max and Joyce is important, but so is protecting Steve. And Steve is getting way too attached, despite Billy’s warnings (and it’s Billy’s fault, isn’t it? Last night Steve said he was staying, and Billy said ‘good.’ What was Steve supposed to do?), and this is just...messy.

Billy can fix this. He’ll run away alone; he’ll hitchhike. (People called the cops and his cops called his dad last time he hitchhiked, but he had been eleven and scared and now he’s seventeen and not the kind of person anyone would doubt got kicked out.)

He’ll tell Steve, when he gets back, not because he wants to say goodbye to Steve, he assures himself, but because Steve will probably try to find him if he doesn’t.

God, Steve is an idiot.

xxx

“YOU’RE WHAT?! ARE YOU DUMB? Did he give you BRAIN DAMAGE? Are you-“

“What is wrong with you? Why would you think that would work? What about YOUR parents, Steve? What about money? Where will you sleep? Is Billy even HEALTHY-“

“HE’LL KILL YOU IN YOUR SLEEP AND NONE OF US WILL KNOW WHERE YOUR BODY IS-“

“Like, I just cannot fathom why this idea is the plan. Why possibly-“

“Are you FLAYED? Did the gate open? Did-“

Robin turns sharply on Dustin. “Dustin,” she says calmly, “can you get out of the car, for, like, two minutes?”

“WHAT? NO! I-“

“DUSTIN!” Robin screams. “Please?”

Dustin’s a little bit scared of Robin, which is the only reason this works. He looks at her, and then back at Steve, and then huffs “I hate you guys,” and gets out of the car. Steve wishes he hadn’t.

Robin turns back to Steve, voice deadly serious and quiet.

“This is not a teenage love story, okay? You can’t... you can’t think you might want to kiss someone and then turn that into the basis for completely giving up your life, okay? You can’t just run away and act like that’s...we’ll never see you again. What if something happens? What if-“ she inhaled deeply. “I know you like Billy. And I trust you. But this is... he doesn’t even like you back, Steve.”

“I know,” Steve says, and he thinks about trying to explain that he doesn’t even actually like Billy like that, but even he knows he’s full of shit. “I- this isn’t about ME, Robin. Okay? This isn’t me trying to be with Billy. This is- Billy isn’t safe here. Okay? He could- he’s afraid he’ll die. I’m afraid he’ll die. And, I’m not- you’re full of bullshit, you know that? You act like you trust me and act like I’m a real person and then I do something and you act like I’m still selfish prick who just does stuff to impress his crushes and- you’re bullshit, Robin. This

isn't about me."

Robin has tears in her eyes, and he does, too, and Dustin is still sitting in the grass a few yards away looking downright pissed.

Steve clears his throat. "I need to talk to Max."

Robin nods. "Let's talk to Max, then."

26. They Belong to You

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: child abuse, mentioned homophobia, panic attacks

Okay guys I'm done with the semester so I have hopes to start rolling with this again. This is so fun for me to write, and I can see so clearly in my head how it all plays out, so I'm hoping I'll be able to finish it up in the next couple of months (but who knows?) As always, y'all's feedback is the best and I appreciate people actually reading this. I hope you like it!!

Billy is not a good person. Max has always known this, in the same way that she's known her dad isn't a good person and Neil isn't a good person and her mom is someone who tries to be a good person. It's not a judgement call, it just...is. Billy is mean and angry and ugly, and he's just always been that way.

He was horrible, at first. He would scream at Max if she got in his way; he would say ugly things to Max's mom just to see if he could make her cry. He was rude to girls and he got in fights with boys and when he drove, he drove like he hoped he was the only person who made it off the road alive. Max hated Billy, and Billy hated her, and Neil hated Billy, and Max's mom loved Neil, and Neil liked Max, and it was all...simple. Horrible and unbearable, but simple. There was one enemy in the house, and it was Billy. It was easy to track. And, yes, Neil was mean to Billy, but Billy...Billy made Max's mom cry. All the time. And Billy hated Max, and he hated Neil, and if Max was big enough to humiliate Billy, she'd probably do it, too.

It wasn't...it's easy, now, to see that maybe she was wrong, and it was never actually simple, and maybe Billy wasn't the only bad guy, but. At the time? She never questioned it.

There was this one time, in California, when... well, Billy was supposed to babysit, and he didn't, which was good with Max. And

she wanted to learn this skateboard trick, but she didn't want her neighbors to see her, because sometimes they made comments about her being a tomboy, and the comments didn't bother her, but they did bother her mom, and her mom was really having a bad week with Billy, so Max thought she would do it inside- what was the worst that could happen?

The worst that could happen, apparently, was a broken window.

Billy came in less than two minutes after the glass shattered, and he looked at her, and at the window, and back at her, and his face turned red and his eyes looked black and she felt sure that he was going to do it, he was going to actually kill her this time. She started to make a run for her room, but he didn't chase her, didn't do anything.

The blood drained from his face and he wasn't red anymore, he was so pale he looked like a corpse, and his hands were shaking as he lifted one up to his throat, and he was gasping for breath, and, for a second, Max thought he was dying. And then he fell to his knees and started throwing up, but nothing was coming out, he was just dry heaving, and his whole body was shaking and his face was so, so scared that Max forgot that he was about to kill her and ran to him.

He pushed her away immediately, still heaving, bracing himself with his elbows. "Don't touch me!" he growled, but he wasn't scary at all. "Go to your room!" He said, and Max didn't move, and he shoved at her again. "Go!" he yelled, but there were tears in his eyes and he rocked back on his knees.

Max was scared. Terrified, actually. And so she left him, even though she knew she shouldn't, because she didn't know what was happening and she didn't know what to do. Max ran to her room and waited for her mom to get home.

When Neil got home, he took one look at the window and he yelled at Billy, even when Max's mom told him it was Max's fault, and he called Billy all of things Max thought Billy was: a bad son, a bad brother, irresponsible, immature, a loser. And Billy just stood there with dead eyes and took it, only opened his mouth to say that he wasn't Max's brother, he was her stepbrother, and Neil yelled so loud

that even Billy jumped.

Billy went to his room after that, and Neil promised Max and her mom that he would take care of this, that Billy would shape up, that Billy was going to start treating them all with respect.

And Max just thought about Billy—pale and quaking and collapsing on the ground—Billy—who took his dad’s screaming without batting an eye—Billy—who told her he’d kill her if she spoke to him again—and she wondered how they were all the same person, and she wondered which one was real.

Billy was awful, though. Billy was not a good person, and he bullied her friends and tried to kill her first boyfriend and tried to kill Steve, who Max didn’t know at the time but seemed NICE, at least, and he was horrible, through and through, to everyone.

She could never shake it, though—the way that Billy looked, scared out of his mind. And that night—that god awful night, when they all almost die for the first time and when Max thinks Billy is going to kill the only people who are nice to her—that’s what she thought about when she listened to Neil kick the shit out of Billy. She doesn’t feel sorry for Billy (she doesn’t she doesn’t she doesn’t), because Billy was AWFUL and Billy was going to KILL them. But here’s what Max thought about: Billy had laughed when Steve hit him, and he had laughed when Max drugged him. He had laughed, and he hadn’t been afraid, not once, not until Max threatened to hit his junk with a bat full of nails and even then, he had been drugged and prone and he had seemed tired, not scared. Billy had laughed.

And when his dad sounded like he was going to kill him, Billy didn’t laugh once. He just said “yes, sir,” and “sorry, sir,” and he sounded small and Max couldn’t hear everything through the wall but she could tell that he was scared. Billy, Max realized that night, was more scared of Neil than he was of a bat full of nails to the balls, and that had to mean something.

Billy was not a good person. But Max...he wasn’t good, but neither was Neil, and Max...Billy would always be a jackass in her eyes. But he might not be the only bad person in her house, and he might not even be the worst one.

Then shit goes down and Billy is ACTUALLY EVIL and then he's a hero and then he's dying and Max doesn't know what any of it means, doesn't know who's the good guy here but she knows that the bad guy isn't Billy, not right now, and here's what matters:

The next time Billy goes pale and shaking and is terrified, Max doesn't run away. She stays. And she promises to keep him alive. And that's what matters.

Billy is not a good person. He never has been. But he's not bad, either. He's just scared. Billy is scared. And Max feels like she's the only one that can see it; the only one that can tell that Billy isn't good because he's using all of his energy to be scared. He's trying to stay alive and they've all been out here, wondering why he was so mean, as if he didn't live in a houseful of people that hated him and wasn't terrified every second. Billy is mean, and he is ugly, and he has been awful. But he's...there's more, now, and Max can see that, and so can Joyce, and so can Steve.

Max just wants someone other than her to want Billy to be safe; she wants someone other than her to see Billy for what he is. And when Steve Harrington calls her on the walkie talkie and says, quietly, that he's going to run away with Billy, that he's not going to let Billy get hurt again, that he's not going to let Billy starve, Max realizes it's not just her anymore. Steve sees Billy, and Steve is going to keep Billy alive, and Steve isn't going to run away when Billy gets scared. Steve is like her.

"You have to take care of him, Steve," she says, and there are tears in her eyes. "You have to...he can't be alone. And sometimes he gets angry and sometimes he gets...his hands shake? And he can't breathe? And you have to...he needs someone with him, okay? He can't...I told him I would keep him alive. So please, just...he HAS to stay alive, even when he doesn't want to, okay? Could you...promise me, Steve. Say it."

"I'll take care of him, Max, I promise." There's a pause on Steve's end. "I'm gonna...I'm gonna take care of Billy. I am."

Max nods, even though Steve can't see it, and she feels so, so sad and so hopeful all at once. "Tell him that he...he should've said bye to me.

He's a coward. And I...tell him I said to just stay alive. And don't be an asshole."

Max's mom walks in the room, and Max turns off the walkie talkie as quickly as she can. She doesn't...she doesn't THINK her mom would tell Neil, but she wants to be sure.

Her mom's face is puffy and tear-streaked, and she sniffls. "Max," she whispers, "we need to talk."

xxx

Harrington comes back to the house looking like he's hasn't slept in weeks, and Billy wonders if that's how he looks, too. He feels like it. Feels worse, actually.

He gets in Steve's car before Steve can get out, 'cause he needs to intercept Steve before Steve can talk to Joyce, needs to start talking to Steve before Steve has the chance to talk about Max. And so Billy just launches in, not giving Steve the time to say a word.

"Plan's not gonna work, buddy. Too many variables. I'm not going down for kidnapping you. So I'm gonna- you're gonna stay here. I'm gonna go. It's better."

Steve looks at him and his face transitions quickly from shock to hurt to anger. "Not gonna happen, Hargrove. You don't have money, you don't have a car, and you have absolutely no charm. You're not making it without me. I'm going with you."

"Don't be a dumbass. You have plenty of chances to get out of Hawkins on your own- don't tag along on mine."

"Fuck you, Billy, you're not leaving without me."

Billy slams a hand on the dashboard, and Steve flinches, which Billy appreciates.

"You don't tell me what to do, I do. I'm calling the shots here. And I say I'm not running away with you, princess."

Steve looks at him and blinks slowly. The anger bleeds out of his face, which is not a good sign for Billy. "You're scared," he whispers. "You think Neil's gonna find you and hurt me?"

"I'm not scared." Billy growls, and it's so stupid it's laughable, as if Harrington hasn't spent the last week watching Billy be scared out of his damn mind.

"Man, why? What- he hasn't found you yet, okay? And you're right. We need to get the hell out of here before he finds Joyce. But...I've killed monsters with a baseball bat, okay? I'm not scared of him. And...do you really think he's gonna follow you? If he hasn't found you yet, is he actually gonna track you down?"

I'm not scared of him, Billy's mind replays, and he sees red for a second. It's easy, sure, to not be afraid of Neil when you don't grow up under him, when you don't know that breathing wrong can get you a black eye, when you don't look into your dad's eyes and know he wants you dead. It's easy to not be scared, sure, but Steve doesn't... "Fuck you, Harrington." Billy hisses, climbing out of the car. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Steve scrambles after him, still talking. "What happened? This morning you were- I can do this! We can do this! This isn't... what HAPPENED?" He's starting to yell now, and there's an edge of desperation in his voice. Billy wonders if everyone inside is watching, if they're all listening. "Last night you were FINE and now you're...what is going on? What happened?"

What happened, of course, is that Billy realized he and Steve were two dumbasses who thought they could pretend that they didn't want to kiss and that that would make it okay to hold hands and run away together and for Steve to basically pledge his life to Billy and that they could act like Billy wasn't BILLY but this other nice, soft person Steve had created and not... Billy can't say any of that. He turns on Steve again, spinning on his heel, and he licks his teeth, nice and slow, and he grins in the way he knows everyone hates.

"God, Harrington, I get it. Listen: I don't care if we run away together. I'm not gonna suck your dick, and, honestly, I'm a little tired of having to deal with this whole thing. I'm leaving. You're

not.”

Steve doesn’t even look angry, the asshole. Just tired. And disappointed. “So we’re back to this, then? Don’t you ever feel like...Jesus, Hargrove, you are the WORST. You know that, right? Just...I am so sick of this shit. You’re nice and you’re different and you’re honest and then the second one of us picks up on that you revert back into being a fucking ASSHOLE like that’s gonna make us all forget... Jesus Christ,” his voice drops into a whisper, and Billy realizes that Steve must be scared people are listening, too, “I said I’m staying and I fucking meant it. Quit trying to push me away ‘cause you’re scared.”

It’s a low moment for Billy, but he can’t help it. He shoves Steve with all his weight, and Steve goes flying, and this is familiar, isn’t it? Steve on the ground in front of the Byers, Billy losing his shit? Some things never change. “Told you to plant your feet,” he says, just like last time, and Steve stands up tall, eyes blazing.

“This is what that looks like now.” He hisses, and he reaches out and takes Billy’s hand, and Billy wants to wrench it back, because people might SEE, but he doesn’t. Billy’s heart rate goes off the fucking charts and he stops feeling angry so quickly it’s horrifying. “Either we go together or we don’t go at all. That’s all there is to it. I’m not...I’m planting my feet, okay? You’re not gonna convince me not to.”

Billy’s breathing hitches. “Get back in the car,” he whispers.

“What?”

“Get back in the car.” He jerks his head towards the house. “I don’t want them to hear.”

Steve nods, and then they’re back in the car, like a couple of idiots. They both stare at the house for a second, and Billy tries to get his breathing under control, and he realizes that Steve knows this, and that Steve is letting him regain control, that Steve is letting him take his time. Billy cannot stand Steve.

He reaches out and grabs Steve’s hand. “Joyce thinks we’re gay.”

Steve makes a face. “What? Why?”

Billy looks pointedly at their hands and Steve’s eyes go wide. “Oh. Right.”

“I can’t run away with you, Steve. I can’t...you don’t know who I am, and you don’t know who Neil is. There isn’t...this isn’t a situation that turns out well for you. And I don’t...God, Harrington, I don’t want to be a bad thing that happens to you, either. Just...let me do this.” Billy feels desperate. He feels like...it’s like he knows, and he’s standing on the edge of a disaster, and Steve is just jumping off the edge and only Billy can see it.

“You don’t have money, and you don’t have a car, and I...this turns out good for me, Billy. Even if it doesn’t, I don’t... Max told me to take care of you. And I promised her I would, and even...even if I hadn’t promised, I would’ve wanted to. I’m not...you think this doesn’t turn out well for me? Trust me, rotting in Hawkins and wondering if you’re alive turns out worse.”

Steve’s hand is cold. Billy interlaces their fingers, and Steve grips his hand tightly, and Billy...they’re idiots.

“I’m not doing this ‘cause I want you to suck my dick.” Steve whispers, face twisting. “I’m doing this ‘cause... I never know what to do. But when I hold your hand I feel like I kind of do. And when I think about leaving you, I know not to. And that’s all there is to it.”

Billy grips Steve’s hand tighter. “When I was...eleven? Ten? Jesus, I don’t know. Neil was dating Susan but hadn’t married her yet. I- I didn’t want a new mom, ya know? I definitely didn’t want Max. And I...Neil was gonna get a new family. I thought he’d be happy. I thought...whatever. I left. I thought he wouldn’t care. He did, actually. Cared a hell of a lot. And when he found me, I...I didn’t walk for a week. Not that I could’ve, if I wanted to. He tied me to a radiator, just to be sure. And I...I got it then. He doesn’t care if I live or die. But he doesn’t...it’s the living without him that gets to him. He doesn’t want me to be happy somewhere. That’s why he’ll look. That’s why he’ll find me. He hates me, Steve, and I don’t want...if he thought I was gay? He already thinks that, I guess, but if I- if he knew? That I ran away with a boy? He’d kill you, okay? Just to make

sure I saw. And...I won't do that. Not to you. We were gonna leave to protect Joyce and Max, right? And I'm telling you that I'm gonna watch out for you, too."

When he looks over at Steve, there are tears in his eyes. He wipes at them angrily, gnaws at his lower lip. "I hate him," he whispers.

"Yeah, me too."

"He wouldn't find us, Billy."

"But I'd always be wondering what would happen if he did."

"That will be me, though, if you go without me, and I'll-

"You'll get over it."

"I won't. And Max won't. And Joyce- you can't be alone, okay?"

Neither of them have mentioned the gay thing, Billy realizes, and neither of them have contended it at all. Steve isn't even...

"Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember when I told you I'd kill you if you thought about kissing me again?"

"It was like two days ago, so, yeah, I'd say it's etched in pretty deep."

Billy exhales. "You still thinking about it?"

Steve looks down at their hands, still interlocked. "All I think about anymore," he whispers, "is if you're safe or not. The other shit- it's just side stuff. It's not what matters."

Billy nods. And then he leans forward and kisses Steve Harrington.

27. They're the Start

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: none, really, except just the general idea of period-typical homophobia that isn't encountered or addressed in this chapter

I hope you guys like this!!! I'm excited we've finally gotten to a first kiss, but also, Steve and Billy still have a very non-linear path in their friendship/relationship and Billy still isn't an incredibly stable person so there's still going to be a lot more going on. Once again, I appreciate everyone reading this!

Billy misses California, but it's not California he misses so much as it is the beach and the sand and the sun and the salt. He misses the ocean. There's this—look, his mom used to always get mad at him, right? 'Cause he'd swim out too far, even when he was little. He just wanted to swim to where he couldn't touch his feet anymore, even when he tried; he wanted the waves to hit him and to taste the salt and for his eyes to sting and for fish to brush his feet and he wanted to know that there was nothing, really, keeping him from floating out except for his own will. It was...that place was where he was alive.

That's why surfing is what it is; it's why people love it (at least, Billy figures that's it). Surfing lets you get farther out and further in but it's still just you; you get to be a part of it all, and if you're strong enough, you can be perfect.

Here's the thing about falling, though: sometimes, it's the best part. You fall so deep so quick and you're not sure which way is up and the waves keep crashing on you and for a second you think oh, god, this is it, and your eyes sting and you know no one above can see you and this is it, you're a part of the ocean, just like you've always wanted. And the key here is to keep your mouth closed: don't breathe in, don't swallow the water. Just keep your mouth closed and fix your eyes on the sun and a couple of seconds later you're saved, and your heart is racing and your adrenaline is pumping and you feel more alive than anyone in the world.

That's what kissing Steve Harrington is like.

xxx

Billy is kissing Steve. Billy is kissing HIM. He is kissing Billy Hargrove. Steve Harrington—right now, in this very moment—is kissing BILLY HARGROVE. Steve is kissing Billy. Steve is kissing Billy. Steve is kissing—something is wrong with this.

xxx

Steve pushes him back just enough so they can look at each other, his hand remaining splayed out on Billy's chest.

"What the fuck was that?" he whispers, and it takes all of Billy's will power to even respond.

"I don't know."

Steve nods slowly, and then his hand grips Billy's shirt and pulls at him and they're kissing again, and Steve's hand is in Billy's hair, and Steve's face has more stubble than Billy thought it would, and Steve's hand is on the back of Billy's neck, and his hand is still cold, and Billy wants to drown.

xxx

STEVE is kissing BILLY. Steve is— there's still something wrong with this. This is BILLY.

xxx

Steve shoves Billy away again, and he keeps his hand in Billy's hair, but he shakes his head.

"No." Steve says firmly, and he shifts his hand so his thumb is next to Billy's eyebrow and his palm is partially cupping Billy's face and he leans their foreheads together. "No," he whispers again, but it's shakier. "I feel like...is this a trap, Billy? I don't know what to do."

"A trap?"

"It's not...um, oh God. I don't...you said you didn't want this, I guess, and I don't...what do I do here?"

If Billy's eyes were open he'd roll them, but Steve's hand is caressing his face and his eyelashes are practically on Steve's and he can feel when Steve breathes.

"I kissed you, dumbass."

"Yeah, but..." Steve swallows audibly. "Why?"

Billy's eyes open.

xxx

Steve can feel Billy's pulse on his neck and Billy's heart is beating so fucking fast, and Steve isn't even really sure if Billy knows, but the hand he has rested on Steve's thigh is starting to shake. Steve doesn't...that means this is bad, right? Steve doesn't know. Is Billy just kissing him 'cause he thinks that's how this works? Are they running away together? Does Billy want to kiss him? Does Steve—that's a stupid question; Steve desperately wants to kiss Billy. But he wants Billy...he would love to kiss Billy at a time when they weren't contemplating never seeing each other again, and he just wants to know that Billy knows that.

"I kissed you, dumbass."

"Yeah, but...why?"

Billy transforms completely, ripping his face out of Steve's hand and his hand off of Steve's leg. "What do you mean WHY?" he half growls, and Steve remembers that, oh, right, this is the boy that shoved him to the ground not five minutes ago.

"Just- come on, you said you were gonna kill me if I wanted to kiss you and now you're kissing me and I'm not supposed to feel weird about it? I don't know what to do here."

"Why wouldn't I want to kiss you?"

"What do you mean WHY WOULDN'T- you've been really clear on

this point, Billy! I don't want you to feel—"

"Jesus, I FEEL like I want to kiss—"

"Okay, fine, just do it then!" Steve didn't really mean to say that but he doesn't care, because Billy erases the space between them so quickly it's like the pause never even happened.

Billy's hands are on his thighs and on his waist and in his hair and Steve feels like he's seconds away from trying to crawl over the console. So this is what kissing Billy Hargrove feels like. It's desperate and it's awkward and it might be the happiest Steve has ever felt.

xxx

Steve is SMILING, which is making it incredibly hard to actually kiss him, but it's making Billy smile, too, which is only further complicating the whole thing.

"Jesus, Harrington, quit smiling so much."

Steve grins at him. "So let me get this straight: you want to kiss me?"

"I did five minutes ago but honestly the desire dwindle every time I see your face."

"Shut the fuck up, dude. YOU want to KISS me."

"Could we stop saying the word kiss? You sound like a twelve year old virgin."

"Oh, sorry. What do you want to say? Make out? French?"

"Go to hell, Harrington."

Steve laughs, and it's a real laugh, and Billy doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of smiling back but he can't help it. Steve touches their foreheads together again, and he puts his hand on Billy's face, and Billy grips Steve's forearm, and it feels...right. This is where Billy is supposed to be.

Steve hums to himself, and then he kisses Billy's nose, which is NOT

something people who are kissing Billy usually do. “You’re not running away without me, asshole.”

Shit. “Steve, this doesn’t change anything.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t gonna let you go before, and I’m not now, either.”

Billy shakes his head. God, Steve is an idiot. “No, listen, all this still stands, okay? I gotta go alone.”

“Tough shit.”

“You goddamn idiot, listen to me. This isn’t...Neil will KILL you.”

“No, he won’t, ‘cause he won’t find us, and if he does-“

“Are you not-“

“BILLY.” Steve says firmly, and his eyes are wide. He puts some space between them, looks at Billy like he’s searching for something. “Your hands are shaking.”

Blood rushes to Billy’s face, and he clenches his hands into fists. He feels like he’s breathing fine, but...he just kissed Steve Harrington, and he has to run away tonight, and...Billy is never going to see Steve again, and he’s never going to see Max again (and oh, shit, perfect, now he’s thinking about his stepsister, which means he definitely doesn’t feel like kissing anyone anymore). Steve takes one of Billy’s hand in his, and all Billy can think is that he doesn’t want to lose this, not yet.

A car pulls up behind them and both Steve and Billy whip their heads around to try to see who it is while separating from each other as much as they can.

“That’s Nancy,” Steve mumbles as he peers through the dark. “She’s probably just here to see Jonathan.”

Billy wishes he felt relief but he doesn’t. It’s too dark for anyone in the house to have seen them in the car but...shit. Steve taps his hand.

“Hey. Billy. Listen to me. We’re gonna work this out. We’re gonna-“

Nancy is rapping at Steve’s window and both boys jump. Steve turns bright pink and Billy tries to make sure he’s as far away from Steve as possible. Steve rolls the window down and Nancy is glowering at eye level, nostrils flaring.

“What the HELL did you do?” she says, and Billy can’t tell which one them she’s talking to.

“Hey, Nance!” Steve says, a little too chipper. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you know, Steve Harrington! What the hell happened? Was this your idea?” She’s getting angrier and Billy’s not really breathing and Steve just looks lost.

“What idea? Really, what are you talking-“

“Oh, okay! So you and him”-she gestures at Billy but keeps her glare locked on Steve- “just show up one day, and all of the sudden everyone’s leaving and everyone’s leaving RIGHT NOW? What the hell?”

Steve glances at Billy. “Ok, how did you find out about that?”

“What do you mean HOW DID- Jonathan told me!”

“Why does JONATHAN know?”

“It’s HIS FAMILY, and I don’t understand-“

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?”

Steve is practically yelling now, and so is Nancy, and Billy is over it. He gets out of the car, ignoring both Nancy and Steve’s yells, and walks into the house.

(HE kissed STEVE HARRINGTON).

As soon as he opens the door he wonders if staying in the car was actually the better option. Every single member of the Byers family—

including the creep, who he never sees, and the girl—is sitting in the living room, and all of them are crying (or, in Jonathan’s case, vaguely teary). They all stare at him, and for a second he wonders if they know- that he was running away, that he kissed Steve, that he’s now the kind of person who’s really into holding hands. Jonathan gets up and brushes past him, on his way to the porch where Steve and Nancy are still yelling. Will and Eleven both continue to gape at Billy, and Joyce clears her throat.

“Billy,” she says quietly, “could you and I have a discussion alone for a minute?”

xxx

Nancy is crying now, but she’s angry crying, which is a million times worse than sad crying, and Steve still doesn’t know what the hell shes angry about. So far, from what he can tell, she doesn’t know that HE just kissed BILLY (he wants to tell her because he wants to tell everyone and he also never wants her to find out because he doesn’t want to deal with it), she doesn’t know that he was planning on running away (for a second he thinks Dustin told, but the kid is more loyal than he gets credit for), and she doesn’t know that Billy tried to bang her mom (that was so long ago Steve feels like it probably doesn’t even matter, but he also feels like Nancy would probably feel like it mattered).

“This affects so many people and I just want to KNOW-“ Nancy is spitting through clenched teeth and tears when Jonathan comes out onto the porch and Nancy immediately falls into him like she’s a fucking widow or something.

Jonathan holds her tightly, and he looks at Steve through watery eyes and, okay, fine, Steve is officially lost. “Dude, what the hell is happening?”

“Oh, like it wasn’t your idea!” Nancy says, but Jonathan shakes his head.

“No, Nance, we need to- apparently my mom’s been thinking about this for awhile, I told you- and you know, now that Hopper- and then Billy, and-“

Steve clears his throat. “Byers? What’s going on here?”

Jonathan and Nancy share a look. “She hasn’t asked him yet,” he whispers to Nancy, and her eyes get big.

“Oh,” she whispers, and Steve thinks she looks apologetic, but also that’s just kind of Nancy’s face.

“Man, just tell me.”

Jonathan wipes his eyes. “Um, my mom- we’re moving. Leaving Hawkins. And Eleven is coming with us, and...my mom’s going to ask Billy to come, too.” He hugs Nancy a little tighter. “She wants us to leave this week.”

28. Of the Coming Race

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced child abuse; general fear of homophobia

Here you go guys!! I hope you like it. Quick note: fear not, I swear we're getting back to Max soon. I hate writing this many chapters without her, and her relationship with Billy is still one of the most important forces of this story. So even though she's been absent, don't worry haha.

Twice now, Billy has cried in front of Joyce Byers. And it's...she gets the impression the boy doesn't cry very much, and that when he has cried, it hasn't necessarily been around people who held him. He just...well, the worst part of Billy crying is the fact that he's crying and it's clear that he's hurt and that he's crying over things that children should not be moved to tears by- the idea of people not being mad, the idea of being wanted. Teenagers should take these concepts for granted, Joyce thinks, and yet Billy treats them like foreign concepts he's never encountered. And it's...there are people in this world who should never have children.

The other awful part about Billy crying, though, is how obviously humiliated he is about it, as if crying is his fault, as if someone is going to...well, Joyce can only assume crying has never led to good things for Billy before. God, she wishes Hopper was here.

Billy paces the kitchen and scrubs at his face while he's still obviously holding back sobs, and Joyce watches him and tries to remain still. The last time Billy cried, he had collapsed in her arms, but this time he distances himself from her as soon as he can, and she wants to respect that, even if all she really wants to do is hug him.

"You could stay with us for as long as you wanted," Joyce says softly, "and you'd always be welcome, even if you leave. I don't have much money, but...you could stay with us while you figure out college, or a job, or whatever you wanted. And the house has enough room- well,

there isn't a bedroom, but there's a sunroom we can use as a bedroom, and you'd be...everyone has agreed to it, too, so it's not...the whole family wants you to come, Billy. All of us."

Billy responds with a choked sob, and he runs his hand through his hair and blinks rapidly. He's looking anywhere but her, and his chin is trembling. "I don't...are you...I can't—"

Steve barrels into the kitchen, hair messy and eyes huge. "BILLY," he says, and his eyes are only on Billy, and there's such a tender concern on his face that Joyce's heart breaks a little bit. Billy may not think there's anything between him and Steve, Joyce thinks, but she's not sure the same can be said of Steve. "Are you—dude, are you ok?"

Billy looks back at Steve with tears running down his face and says, shakily: "You need to leave."

Steve looks panicked. "Billy, no, I—"

"No!" Billy shakes his head wildly. "No, not like that, just...I need to talk to Joyce. You can—just WAIT, Steve, okay? I'm fine."

Steve hesitates, glancing at Joyce and then back at Billy. "You're fine?" he repeats, and Billy nods.

"I'm fine," he says softly. "Just go wait, okay?" He and Steve share a look that looks so much like the one they shared on the porch this morning when they were holding hands that Joyce...well, she doesn't know what's happening here.

Steve says "okay" and nods at Joyce and then leaves the room with all the gracefulness of his entrance, and Billy turns back to Joyce and sniffles.

"Oh shit," he mumbles. "Oh shit." And then he sinks to the floor and puts his head between his knees.

xxx

He has to tell her, right? Because she's been good and she's been kind and she wants to take him in and it would be wrong, right? And he's already done so many wrong things in this house—he doesn't even

know if she knows that he tried to kill her son—and it would be—but what if she hates Steve, too? He could never—he doesn’t want to do that to Steve. She had said earlier that she didn’t—but saying that and meaning it are NOT—but she had seemed real, and—shit. He has to tell her.

“I kissed Steve,” Billy whispers, and now his hands actually are shaking. “I said earlier that—but—he didn’t kiss me back,” he adds, as if that will keep Steve blameless, somehow, and Joyce’s eyebrows raise. She knows he’s lying. Shit. “Does that—do you—I understand if that changes your offer.”

Joyce looks like she’s gonna cry. “Billy, no, I meant what I said this afternoon—I don’t—I want you to be safe and happy, sweetie. I don’t care if you’re...I like Steve.”

Billy nods, and he tries to swallow back tears again. Jesus, what is going on with him today? He’s holding hands, he’s kissing boys, he’s blubbering on someone’s kitchen floor. This is not who Billy used to be.

“I don’t—we can’t,” he whispers, ducking his head between his knees again. “My dad—if Neil found you he’d kill you.”

Joyce sighs. “I know you’re afraid, but...there would be so many of us, and we...we’ve come up against a lot worse than one man, horrible as he might be. And we...if you’re right, and he tried to find us, you’d be safer with us, anyways.”

Billy’s chest is cracking, and, God, this is so embarrassing. He’s not...it’s not about HIM being safe, it’s about THEM, but no one seems to get that.

“Billy, listen to me.” There’s an edge to Joyce’s voice, and when he looks up at her, she’s gritting her teeth. “I know you think I’m in danger, and that you’re trying to protect people. But you’re the child, okay? You get to have someone else protect you.”

xxx

Steve used to be in love with Nancy. Like really, seriously, truly in

love. And he'd never felt anything like it. And it was great, and perfect, and precious, and he's a whole different person now, even if sometimes, selfishly, he wishes he wasn't. It was all so much easier before, you know? When it was just him and it was simple. But maybe that wasn't Nancy; maybe that's the monster shit—maybe Nancy didn't change him at all, it was just the Demogorgon and the Demodogs and the people dying. It's impossible to tell, is the thing. Nancy, the Upside Down, Barb in his pool: it's all the same. It's all tied together. And Billy is tied into that now, too, even though he's been tied into it for awhile, ever since he tried to shatter Steve's face. Billy's all of it now. This summer he briefly became the embodiment of every bad thing that has happened to them, and this week he's been...Steve doesn't know. But it's all tied together, right? Nancy and the Upside Down and Russians and the Mind Flayer and Billy. It's all of it.

But when Steve looks at Billy, he doesn't feel all of it. He just feels...it's just Billy. Billy, isolated from all of it; Billy, who Steve was ready to leave Hawkins for less than an hour ago; Billy, who has freckles on his nose and a scar on his hand. Billy, who's currently crying on the kitchen floor inside, while Steve sits outside on the porch and looks at the girl that was once the great love of his life. Nancy changed him, and he feels like Billy has, too. But it's hard to say.

He kissed Billy. That's important. That's nuts. That means...something. But he doesn't always know what anything means, especially with Billy, who never takes a single step in one direction without sprinting back the other way. And even if...Billy thought he was kissing Steve because he'd never see him again. They may never kiss again.

The kiss was important, yeah, but it's not what MATTERS. That's what Steve keeps telling himself. That was always the problem with Nancy: Steve forgot what mattered. He got so excited about being in love and being happy and being with Nancy that he forgot the other shit; he forgot that Nancy had other stuff going on.

The kiss is important. But what matters is Billy being safe. What matters is Billy getting away from his dad. That's what MATTERS.

But GODDAMN, he kissed Billy Hargrove. Jesus fucking Christ. He kissed Billy Hargrove.

Nancy and Jonathan are whispering to each other, and Steve wants to shout at them, to say: “hey, guess what, me and Billy just made out in my car,” but, again, that’s not what matters right now. Still, though, he kind of wishes he could call Robin. (Earlier today he thought he had said goodbye to Robin and Dustin until at least Christmas, and now he has no idea what’s happening. He should probably tell them he may not be running away anymore, but the truth is he has no idea what he’ll be doing. It depends on Billy, he guesses. A little part of him hopes he gets to see Robin and Dustin again soon, and a little part of him hopes he gets to run away with Billy. It’s all selfish.)

It’s good, right? That Joyce wants Billy to come with them? It’s good. And it makes way more sense than Billy and Steve running away in the middle of the night with no plan, and it’s probably safer, and it’s definitely more...stable. It’s what’s best for Billy, easily. Steve just hopes...he doesn’t want to lose Billy. (But what Steve wants isn’t what matters right now. Billy is what matters right now).

“Are you okay, Steve?” Nancy asks, and her eyes are still watery and Steve does feel for her—Jesus, her boyfriend is about to up and move, and they just barely got through the worst summer in the world. Nancy has really had a shitty go of it the last two years, and it’s not getting better for any of them, apparently.

(It might be getting better for Steve. He just kissed Billy Hargrove. But, also, Billy is having possibly the worst summer of them all.)

“Yeah, I’m fine, I just...I’ll feel better when I talk to Billy.”

Nancy and Jonathan look at each other. “So you and Billy are just...good, then?” Jonathan asks, and Steve shrugs.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I mean, I guess I thought after all that shit with...you know, and then this summer, that—“

“Me and Billy are good.” Steve snaps, because he doesn’t like

answering to Nancy but he definitely doesn't feel like he needs to answer to Jonathan. Except, yeah, okay, Jonathan is about to give up his life so his mom can help Billy, so maybe Steve should calm down. Steve clears his throat. "Billy...he's a good guy." (Jesus Christ, a good guy? He may be overselling it here.) "He'll—well, I guess he has to say yes, first, but he will, me and your mom will convince him—he'll be good with your family. It'll be—dude, he loves your mom. Everything will be fine."

Nancy raises her eyebrows with a half smile. "You and Joyce will convince him?"

"Yeah."

"And you're someone Billy listens to now?"

"Fuck off, Nancy."

Jonathan looks offended but Nancy just looks pleased with herself. "You're an idiot, Steve Harrington."

Well, there's no point in arguing that. Steve leans his head back on the wall and closes his eyes. Billy told him to wait, so he is, but he's ready to talk to Billy. He wonders if Billy is still crying on the floor. Shit. He wants to talk to Billy.

xxx

Billy wants to talk to Steve. He wants to tell Steve everything and he wants to kiss Steve again and he wants to figure out what the hell he and Steve are doing now and he wants to ask what Steve thinks he should do.

But this isn't about what Billy wants. Right? This is about doing what he needs to. This is about trying his best to be enough. So he doesn't need to talk to Steve: he needs to talk to the girl.

The girl—Eleven, her name is Eleven (fucking weird name)—is sitting on the floor of her bedroom, walkie talkie in hand. She's crying, too, which should make Billy feel better about the fact that his face probably looks like it got hit by a train, but instead just reminds him that he's literally been crying like a twelve year old girl.

“Mike,” she whispers into the walkie, eyes locked on Billy, “I have to go. I’ll be back.”

“El, just call back, please. Please, El.”

“I will.” She shuts the walkie off and looks pointedly from Billy to the ground.

He sits down on the floor but stays a few feet away from her, bringing his knees up and resting his arms on them. His hands are kind of shaky, but he’s pretty sure that’s just residual effects from earlier. Holy shit, he kissed Steve today. Of course, he immediately followed it with crying on a kitchen floor, so it’s not like he’s doing well. He clenches his hands into fists.

The girl stares at him. She can’t do any of her freak stuff anymore, he’s pretty sure, or at least that’s what Max seems to think. But she still looks at him like she knows, and he can’t help but remember what it was like, to have her in his head and to have that thing in his head and to not even be able to keep his thoughts to himself. He tries not to flinch.

She frowns. “You hide from me,” she says, and he just looks at her. “Why?”

He taps his knee. “I don’t know.”

She looks away. “I had a Papa. My Papa was a bad man.” She shudders a little, and the hair on the back of his neck stands up. “And then Hopper was my papa, and Hopper was a good man.” She looks back at Billy, eyes piercing. “Hopper’s gone.”

He nods. “I know,” he whispers. “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “That part wasn’t your fault.”

Billy’s not sure about that—the details get fuzzy about what he was in relation to the Russians, but he feels confident that everything in Starcourt was his fault—but he doesn’t say anything. She saw his mom. Only three people in Hawkins know what his mom’s voice sounds like, and one of them is this kid. And he tried to kill her.

"I want to leave," she whispers, even as tears begin to run down her face. "I want to leave if Hop isn't here."

He inhales shakily. "Joyce, she- she wants me to come. But I- I tried to kill you. And I..." He rubs at his eyes, grinds the heel of his hand into the spot above his nose. "I've lived in a house with someone who almost killed me. And it...whatever. So you can say no."

Eleven tilts her head and purses her lips. "Say no?"

"Yeah. I don't...if you don't want me to come, I won't come. I don't want to be"-what had she called her papa?- "a bad man." He tried to kill this kid. And, yeah, he tried to kill the others, too, but they were collateral: the point was to kill her. And he almost did. And he sacrificed people to get to her, and...Jesus Christ, he thinks he might throw up. He tried to kill this kid.

"You're not a bad man." Eleven says, and she sounds confused, which makes Billy feel sicker. "You fought the Mind Flayer."

"Yeah, but not enough. And I- look, do you even feel safe when I'm in a room with you?"

Billy has been in rooms where he wasn't safe for most of his life, and...he can't do this. He can barely be in a room with Steve without wondering if Steve is scared Billy's gonna break his nose again. He doesn't...he can't be Neil for someone.

Eleven frowns again. "I don't know." She gives him a look. "You hide from me. We're not in the same room."

Well, yeah. That's a fair hit, he guesses. "You can tell me not to come."

"You want to come?"

"I don't know." That's a lie.

"Joyce wants you to come."

"I know."

“Will wants you to come.”

Shit, how the fuck did he win over bowl cut kid? He does his best to not even look at that kid.

“I want you to come.” She adds softly, then nods and repeats confidently: “I want you to come.”

He feels like his heart is gonna come through his fucking chest.
“Really?”

“Yes. I want you to come.”

Jesus Christ, he’s crying again. This has got to stop. He sniffs, and she looks at him sternly.

“My Papa was a bad man. Your Papa is a bad man. Don’t hide from me anymore.”

He nods. “Yeah, okay. Okay.”

29. The Earth Is a Bitch

Notes for the Chapter:

Warning: mentioned child abuse, mentioned homophobia, mentioned child neglect

Ok guys sorry it's been such a long time. I hope you enjoy this chapter!!

Side note: I am absolutely LIVID right now because recently I started rewatching Avatar on Netflix for the first time since it aired and OKAY so there's a scene where Aang is talking to Zuko about what it would have been like if they had met when they were children, and he asks if Zuko thinks they would have been friends.

And apparently I saw that scene in elementary school and thought it was such a fucking raw line that 15 years later I completely recreated the scene with Billy and Steve without ever noticing. So, if you read that scene and thought "this feels familiar" that's because it is!!! I totally ripped off Avatar!

Anyways, I apologize for the plagiarism. I swear it was unintentional.

Nancy and Jonathan eventually leave to be alone together, which Steve gets. You don't usually want to cry about your boyfriend moving while your ex—who may have accidentally helped cause all of this—is, like, right there. He gets it.

He's alone on the porch, though, and it's hard to get his mind to stop racing, because on one hand—well, HE kissed BILLY, and holy shit. But on the other hand, Billy might be about to leave. And Billy should leave, really. It's safe. It's fair. It protects Billy.

Also...shit. Steve had been so preoccupied in the car (because he was KISSING Billy) that he didn't actually have time to think about any of

the shit Billy was saying, didn't have time to process what Billy had explained. And...well.

Steve has hurt Billy more than once. There's the time he hit him with a car, of course; the time he punched him in the face. Several instances of shoving him in basketball practice. And, yeah, Steve did all of that on purpose. It wasn't like he didn't mean to hurt Billy. He always knew what he was doing. But it wasn't...the point was never hurting Billy. It was always just about stopping him. Stopping him from hurting the kids, stopping him from killing Nancy, stopping him from getting the ball. And yeah, he didn't hold back, and no, he didn't care if he hurt Billy. But he was never acting because he just wanted to hurt Billy, and...

Jesus Christ, Billy was TEN. Billy was TEN and his dad looked at him and just wanted to hurt him, and he tied him to a fucking... Steve is gonna be sick. Because he can't imagine, if the Russians fracturing his face had been his dad, if he had been ten, if he had known that that was all there was ever gonna be. And he knew Billy's dad was awful, that Billy's dad was a monster, knew it as soon as he saw Billy's blood on his own mirror. But he can't stomach it right now, can't stop thinking about Billy saying "I've had worse" that night and about Billy, ten years old, with no mom and tied to a fucking radiator.

Steve isn't...he's not equipped for this kind of thing. That's been glaringly obvious all week long. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to do, and Billy...Billy kissed him, and Steve doesn't know how to be the kind of person who gets to kiss Billy.

Billy stumbles out on to the porch, scrubbing at his face. He looks like he's aged five years since Steve last saw him, his eyes puffy and his shoulders slumped. He looks exhausted. (They haven't slept in so long. Steve is so tired. Billy has to be worse.)

Billy looks at Steve with bleary eyes and clears his throat. "Joyce asked me—"

"I know," Steve says quietly.

Billy nods. "I'm gonna- I'm gonna do it, Steve."

A knot in Steve's chest releases, and he breathes deeply for the first time in hours. "Good."

Billy looks...embarrassed? Upset? Steve doesn't know this look. "I know I shouldn't. If my dad- if Neil- if he-"

"No," Steve says softly. "I mean, I know, but...you're gonna get out of here, Billy. With a whole family. Your dad can't...even if he finds you, man, I've seen Joyce face a lot worse. You're gonna—" Steve's voice cracks, which is awful, and he tries to keep it steady. "Listen, Billy. Your dad's awful. Horrible. A goddamn nightmare. I don't...I don't know how you made it this far, okay? If I were you I'd just be scared, all the time, and—" he cuts himself off. Billy's face is basically crumpling in on itself, and Billy's been through enough. Steve lowers his voice again. "What I'm trying to say is. Yeah. It makes sense to be afraid of your dad. But. You don't have to...you don't have to do it alone."

Billy opens his mouth slightly, runs his tongue over his teeth. He kicks at the ground, shuffles his feet. "I don't...I don't know how to fucking feel." There's an edge to his voice, and he sounds desperate. "It's just...it's a fucking lot, Steve."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Billy's looking everywhere but Steve's face. "I can't...I'm so tired, and I..." he swallows. "I don't wanna be alone right now," he whispers, so quietly Steve almost misses it. "I can't...I can't fucking kiss you right now, but...I don't know how to fucking feel, and I don't wanna be fucking alone, and I'm so fucking tired."

Billy's asking something of Steve right now, but Steve's not a hundred percent sure what it is. Billy cuts his eyes at Steve, and his eyes are bloodshot and shining. "Will you just...please? Steve. I can't...please."

Steve inhales slowly. "Are you...do you want me to sleep in the room with you?"

Billy's face contorts, like he hates Steve, like he hates himself.

“Yeah.”

Steve smiles, just a little. He doesn’t know how to be the kind of person who deserves to kiss Billy, but he can do this. “Yeah.”

xxx

Steve pauses in the bedroom doorway but Billy mumbles “Get in the fucking bed, asshole,” and tries not to think about how he’s become someone who just wants Steve Harrington to sleep in the same bed as him. He can’t...he can’t kiss Steve right now. There’s just so much shit in his head and he feels like if he kisses Steve he’ll lose his fucking mind, like he may just start crying and never come back, which would be even more fucking humiliating than all of the other shit Steve’s seen this week. But he doesn’t want to leave Steve, not yet. And he’s tired, and he knows Steve’s tired, and he can’t...he doesn’t know how to say it to Steve, this feeling in the pit of his stomach he gets when he thinks about being alone right now, because he’s always been alone, and it shouldn’t be hard anymore. But he can’t do it.

So he settles into bed, and even though they’re not touching, he can feel the warmth of Steve beside him, can hear Steve’s breaths. Billy is not alone right now. He has to fight to keep his breathing normal. Billy isn’t alone right now.

“Joyce told me...She said she loved me.”

Steve breathes in sharply. “Really?”

“Yeah, she...no one says that shit to me, Steve. Not since my mom.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then, in the dark, Steve’s arm is around Billy’s chest, and his face is buried into the back of Billy’s neck, and everything about his touch is so gentle and so slow and so sure and something in Billy’s chest is cracking.

“Jesus, Billy,” Steve whispers, but his voice is breaking, too, and there are tears on Billy’s back, and holy shit, Steve Harrington is crying for Billy fucking Hargrove.

It takes a full minute for Billy to speak without sobbing. “Stop blubbering before I kick you back to the couch. Go the fuck to sleep,

man.”

“Whatever.” Steve huffs, but he holds Billy tighter.

“How the fuck did we get here?”

Steve sighs. “I don’t know.”

“You need to go to sleep.”

Steve hums. “Then go to sleep, Billy.” His eyes are closed and his voice is drowsy and for the first time in forever, Billy is not sleeping alone right now.

Billy is not alone right now, and there’s a family that wants to live with him, and there’s a crazy girl that wants to help him, and there’s someone that loves him, and he’s leaving Neil.

Billy is not alone right now. He repeats it to himself until the words are fake, until long after Steve has fallen asleep, arm still wrapped around him.

Billy isn’t alone right now.

xxx

Billy should be gone by now. If Steve was right, and they did it, Billy should be gone by now. Billy and Steve should be well on their way out of Indiana. And that’s a good thing. That’s a good thing.

But Max just...she wants Billy to KNOW. She wants to tell him what her mom said, she wants to tell him what’s happening, she wants him to know, and he can’t, because he’s gone, and she’s never gonna see him again, and he didn’t even tell her goodbye. And she...it’s a GOOD thing, because Steve acres about Billy, and Billy gets to get out of Hawkins, and away from Neil, and Max is being selfish.

But she wants to see him. And as she and her mom drive back into Hawkins, she can’t help but hope: maybe they haven’t left yet. Maybe she can still say goodbye.

Her walkie is dead—died last night, and Aunt Linda didn’t have any

batteries—and she doesn't want to risk wasting any time in her house. (It's amazing how natural her mom is around Neil, how she kisses him on the cheek as he heads to work, how she nods quietly as he whispers to her that he still hasn't found "the damn kid." Her mom acts like nothing is wrong, like nothing is happening, like their life isn't about to be totally upended again. Max can barely even look at Neil, she's so scared her face will give it all away). As soon as Neil's truck pulls out of the driveway, she hovers in her mom's bedroom doorway hopping from one foot to the other. Her mom is rummaging through the closet, casual as if she's looking for church clothes.

"Mom, I..." Max sighs, tries not to cry. "I have to tell my friends."

"I know," her mom says, voice soft. "Go."

Max has barely been granted permission before she's tearing out of the house, only one thought on her mind:

Maybe they haven't left yet. Maybe she still gets to say goodbye.

xxx

Billy has to basically peel Steve off of him to get up in the morning. Steve doesn't even flinch, just keeps on snoring like a goddamn idiot. Steve deserves to sleep, Billy figures. Doesn't seem like he's been doing much of it since they got here.

Billy still wasn't really able to sleep last night, but, for once, the thoughts keeping him up weren't about Neil but about the fact that Steve fuckin' Harrington was in his bed. It was nice. Every time Billy began to freak out because Joyce had basically offered to adopt him, he'd roll over and see Steve drooling and it would feel...okay. For a minute, at least. Billy could get used to this.

Except Billy can't get used to this, for more reasons than one, and he has got to get that in order. Steve isn't important right now. Billy can't afford for Steve to be important right now. (Then why did he kiss him? Dumbass). Billy can't just think about Steve instead of actually dealing with shit.

Except that Steve is in his bed, and Steve kissed him yesterday, and Steve cried for him, and...

Someone's pounding on the door. Billy's whole body freezes. Shit. Shit. Sure, Joyce says she's okay, but that's just Joyce, and—

"Billy! Billy! Open the door! BILLY!"

Holy shit.

Billy has barely even cracked the door before he's colliding with Max, who's wrapping her arms around him and getting her hair in his mouth and burying her face in his chest and outright sobbing.

"I thought you already left! I thought you left and I wouldn't say goodbye and you're the WORST Billy I HATE you don't ever make Steve say goodbye for you again I thought I would NEVER see you again."

They've never hugged like this before. Slowly, Billy puts his arms around her. Jesus Christ. He's crying, too, and he's not even sure when he started.

He thought he'd never see Max again. And in all of this, he had kind of forgotten about that, because it'd been okay, because it meant she was safe (she's not safe right now she's not safe right now she's not safe right now), and even if he did want to see her again, it was selfish, and—

But she's here now. And he had almost never seen her again. And—Jesus Christ. He tucks his chin to rest on her head for a second, wonders how he didn't realize that he missed her so much it hurt.

She's still talking. For once, he doesn't mind. "And, Billy, so much is happening, and my mom—she's gonna LEAVE, Billy—and she and Aunt Linda don't think it's safe anymore, so we're gonna leave, and we just came back to get some stuff, and Neil doesn't know, and—"

She breaks off, and Billy can't even process what she's saying, because it's sounds like Susan is leaving Neil, and that flies in the face of everything he knows about Susan, and Neil is gonna be pissed, and Max is gonna be safe, and—

“Holy shit,” Max whispers, and Billy realizes that she’s looking past him now, arms still wrapped around him. She’s looking behind him, at the goddamn bed.

Billy turns his head around—he’s still hugging Max, doesn’t want to think about how much he doesn’t want to let go right now—and Steve Harrington is sitting upright, eyes wide, hair going in a million different directions. Shit.

Max lets go of Billy and turns to the door, and Billy’s stomach drops, and shitshitshit he JUST got Max back-

Max doesn’t leave. She shuts the door, placing her whole body weight against it. She stares at Billy, and she doesn’t seem angry, and she doesn’t seem disgusted, she just seems...like Max.

“Billy,” she whispers, and Billy can hear Steve scrambling behind him, “what the fuck?”

xxx

Steve wakes up to the goddamn sweetest family reunion he’s ever seen in his life—it could be sweeter if it wasn’t caused by horrific circumstances, he guesses—and for a second, he’s so amazed to see Billy and Max hugging each other and crying—yeah, they’re better now, but they were screaming about how much they hated each other so recently Steve’s ears still hurt—that he actually forgets that he is in Billy’s bed, that this is a weird place for him to be, that maybe Max has just walked in on what could be a really horrible situation.

He doesn’t know what to do. Should he move? Should he speak? Should he- Max makes the decision for him.

She locks them all into the bedroom before Steve can even decide to say something, and part of him wonders who Max is protecting them from, who exactly she’s locking out, and part of him is so damn touched that MAX is trying to protect HIM—even if he’s just an extension of Billy (which, holy shit, is he an extension of Billy?)—that he thinks he could cry, too, which would really round out the room.

“What the fuck?” she’s whispering, and Billy’s eyes are darting between Steve and Max and he actually looks spectacularly calm, except that his hand has a tremor in it and his ears are kind of red.

“Max...” Steve and Billy say at the same time, which makes her eyes go even wider.

The room is still quiet. So quiet, actually. None of them say a word for a moment, and Steve wonders if he should be more upset than he is right now. Because he doesn’t care if Max knows. It’s possible he doesn’t care if the world knows. And-

There’s a car in the driveway. Steve can’t see it, but he can hear it, and he briefly questions who it could even be before he notices how pale the step siblings in front of him have turned.

Billy’s chest starts heaving almost immediately. “Maxine,” he whispers, and his voice sounds desperate, it sounds like he’s pleading, “you didn’t.”

Steve doesn’t know what’s going on, but his stomach is dropping.

“He was at work,” Max whispers, equally desperate, “he was at work, he already left, I waited-“

No. Nonono shitshitshit FUCK-

“BILLY!” A voice outside the house roars, and Steve knows, immediately, even though he’s never heard that voice before, exactly who it is.

Fuck.

30. We've Finished Our News

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: child abuse, verbal abuse

Joyce is running through the hallway, towards the porch, towards the voice, when Steve barrels out of the bedroom, almost running into her. (Steve was in Billy's bedroom, which is...that's interesting, but she'll think about it later). He slams the door behind him and looks at her, panic in his eyes.

"It's Neil," he whispers, "it's Billy's dad, it's his dad, he followed Max."

"BILLY!"

God, the man must be on the porch by now. Nancy and Jonathan stumble out of Jonathan's room, and Joyce can see Eleven and Will, eyes wide and frozen still, at the end of the hallway.

Joyce points at them. "Go to Will's room," she whispers, "and lock the door. Do not move from there; you understand me?"

Eleven wants to protest, Joyce can see that clearly, but Eleven has no powers and, for once, this fight isn't about her.

"Go," she commands, and Will pulls at Eleven, and Joyce waits until she can hear the click of their door locking.

"Who is it?" Nancy hisses, and they all jump as someone begins pounding on the front door, yelling: "BILLY! I know you're in there!"

"It's his dad," Steve says, voice cracking, as if the answer isn't obvious. "It's Billy's dad."

Nancy nods once with a tight face and disappears back into Jonathan's room, leaving Steve, Jonathan, and Joyce to all stare at each other.

"He can't see Billy," Steve pleads. "He can't, he'll kill him."

"I know," Joyce says back, heart pounding in her chest. She wishes Hop was here. "I know."

xxx

If Billy walks out of that room, Steve will kill him himself. That's what he's thinking as he walks out onto the porch—if Billy willingly places himself one foot closer to this man, Steve is going to kill him. Steve's not sure if he's ever been this scared in his life. There's been worse times, sure; the time when he saw his first flower faced demon monster, the time he thought Dustin was about to die, the times he thought they were all going to die. But those times had an accompanying adrenaline, something that kept him from fully realizing how terrified he was. In those moments, he did what needed to be done. It was only afterwards, in the emptiness of his house, that he realized how awful it all was, how scared he felt all the time.

Now, though, he knows. He knows how scared he is, because he's looking at this man, who's only human, and he's normal, not even Russian, not even a government guy in a suit, and he knows that he, Joyce, and Jonathan are the only things standing between this monster and Billy, and, honestly, he's not sure they're enough.

He won't lose Billy. He won't.

Steve's not sure what he thought Neil would look like, but it wasn't this, because this man looks like someone Steve could walk by in a grocery store without flinching, someone Steve could serve ice cream to without thinking twice. He seems normal. He seems normal, but Steve knows he's one of the worst people in the world.

For a moment, everyone is quiet. Neil breathes through his nose, sizing them up, one by one, and Joyce clears her throat.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for my son," Neil spits out, and it's such a weird formality, what they're all doing now, pretending everyone on this porch doesn't already know. "You're keeping him in your house."

Joyce clenches her jaw. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking

about.”

Neil laughs. “I think you do. My son? Billy? He ran away, and you’ve been hiding him. It’s time for him to come home.”

Every muscle in Steve’s body is tense, and his heart is in his throat.

“Your son is not-“ Joyce starts, and Neil shakes his head.

“He is. My daughter’s here, right? I saw her walk in this house. They’re coming home with me. Now.”

“Man, they’re not here,” Steve sneers, and oh God, he’s done this before, he’s lied to a Hargrove on the porch while hiding Max inside the Byers’ house, and, Jesus Christ, last time didn’t go well, either.

Neil stares at him. “Who the fuck are you?” His voice is quiet, but Steve feels like Neil knows everything about him, like Neil sees straight through the bullshit and knows who Steve is and hates Steve, hates him enough to kill him, hates him enough to leave him bleeding and broken on a mattress in a locked room for a whole week. Billy lives with this? Billy spent his life with this? Finally, Steve feels some adrenaline kick in.

“I’m Steve fucking Harrington, and I’m telling you, Billy’s not here.”

Neil just stares at him, and Steve hates him, he hates him so much that the only way to keep his hands still is to clench them into fists at his sides and bite the insides of his cheeks.

“I’ve heard your name before,” Neil says. “You were there at Starcourt, right? When the place burned to the ground?” He rubs his hand at his jaw. “You wanna tell me what you were doing at the mall with my son and a bunch of kids?” His mouth twitches. “You a pervert, too?”

Steve takes a step forward and Jonathan wrenches him back while Joyce places a small hand on his chest. “Calm down,” she whispers, but her eyes are huge.

“Your son isn’t here and I want you off my property.” She says confidently, raising her chin.

“You can lie all you want, lady, but we both know he’s here.” Neil focuses his glare at the house. “MAX!”

“She’s not here,” Steve mumbles, but even as he says it, he’s looking at Max’s bike thrown at the front of the house, a gift from one of the boys, one of their hand me downs, passed to Max because they weren’t sure her skateboard could make it all the way to the Byers. Neil looks at it, too, and his face is red.

“You will not hide my daughter from me,” Neil says, and he takes a step forward, a step towards Joyce, and Steve and Jonathan both converge in front of her, but Neil’s not stopping, and shit, they’re gonna have to do this, huh?

The door opens behind them and Steve’s heart shrinks. No. Fuck.

“Neil?” Max’s voice is smaller than Steve’s ever heard it, and she moves in between them and Neil quicker than they can stop her, moves enough that’s he’s out of Steve’s reach and he takes a step towards her and she pointedly dodges his grasp. “What’s wrong?”

Neil looks at her, and for a moment he looks like a normal man again, and Steve hates him.

“Where’s Billy, Max?”

“I don’t know,” she says, still in that small voice. “I thought Mom said you hadn’t found him yet.”

Neil looks at her like he’s going to murder her. “I know he’s here. I know you came to see him.”

Max shakes her head. “I came to see my friends,” she whispers. “El and Will. They live here. I just came to see them.”

Neil rubs his jaw again. “Then why didn’t you come when I called?”

She’s shrinking in front of them; Steve is watching Max melt into the earth.

“Well, I was,” she stutters a little, “I was scared.”

Something snaps in Neil's face. "You little fucking bitch," he hisses, and he lunges, and it all happens at once. Joyce reaches out and grabs Max and pulls her in and Steve steps out and catches a backhand to the face- a backhand meant for a 14 year old girl, what the fuck- and then Steve has Neil on the ground, and they're both kicking and shoving and punching and everything is red and Steve can't see straight and then there's a hand on the back of his neck, pulling him back, shoving him away, and then there's a body between him and Neil, and it's Billy, of course it's Billy.

xxx

As soon as he saw Neil's eyes go dark Billy was out the door. He knew what that look meant, knew Neil was about to hurt Max, knew it didn't matter anymore that she's the favorite and that she's perfect and that she is a child. Billy sees it happening and fucking sprints. But Steve stops it before he can, Steve protects Max, Steve fucking tackles his dad, and Billy is so mad and so grateful and so nauseous all at once. He sees Neil land a good punch on Steve's chin, and he's not even sure what he's doing, but he's in between Neil and Steve now, and his dad is going to kill him, and Steve could've been really fucking hurt, so it's worth it, it's okay. Neil had been about to hit Max. Neil had hit Steve. Neil can have Billy, for all Billy cares.

"Dad," he says, "you have to leave." This is it, this is what he's been afraid of this whole time, that Neil would hurt Max, that Neil would hurt Steve, that Neil would want to hurt Joyce. These are all his worst fears recognized; this is it.

Neil just looks at him, and Billy knows that face, and he wishes he didn't care, wishes he didn't automatically tuck his chin and wish he was dead.

"So this is where you're hiding?" Neil gestures at everything behind Billy, at all the people who have tried to keep him alive. "This is it? You get scared, so you run? You can't even stand your ground? You run, and you run to this?" He laughs. "Some skinny boys, a woman, and children? These are who you hide behind? You always run, Billy, you've always been a fucking pussy. You're pathetic. Do you see that? Hiding behind these people? You're pathetic."

“Yes sir,” Billy says, and he hates that he says it, hates that it’s automatic, and he hates the way he can hear Steve and Joyce behind him but he can’t actually hear what they’re saying.

Neil’s jaw works. “Here’s what’s gonna happen. You are going to get in this car, and your sister is going to get in this car, and we are going to go home, and you’re gonna fucking apologize to me, and to Susan, and to these people, for all the fucking trouble you’ve caused because you were too scared to do anything for yourself. Okay?”

People are saying no and other things and there’s a horrible crack in Steve’s voice but Billy is already nodding. “Yes sir,” he whispers, but he knows they can’t, because he’s not letting Max live in the house with this man, he’s not letting Max in the car with him, he can’t do this.

“Billy,” Steve says behind him, and he can’t look away from Neil’s eyes, ‘cause Neil hates when he does that, hates when he’s too scared to make eye contact. “Billy, look at me, please, Billy, please.” He can’t. “Billy,” Steve whispers, and this is Steve, who cried for Billy, who keeps staying, who doesn’t leave, who holds his hand and held him last night. This is Steve.

Billy turns to look at him, and as he does, he knows.

“I couldn’t hear you,” Neil says, because Neil’s not content with just getting Billy back, he has to humiliate him, too, but it’s too late.

Billy turns back to Neil. “No.” He swallows. “No, sir.”

Neil’s hand shoots out and grabs him by the neck and Max screams and Joyce is yelling and even Jonathan is speaking, holy shit, Billy didn’t know he talked, and Steve, of course, rushes forward and has a knee in Neil’s stomach and a hand wrenching at the arm that’s trying to cut off Billy’s lungs, and then everything freezes and everyone goes silent.

Someone’s speaking, calmly and quietly, and even Neil is watching, and he lets go of Billy, and Steve pulls Billy into himself and they both stare at the porch where Nancy stands, calmly pointing a handgun at Billy’s dad.

“You need to leave,” she repeats, and Steve wraps his arms around Billy, holds him to his chest, moving them away from Neil, and Neil looks at them and KNOWS, Billy can see it in his eyes.

A soft click. The gun is cocked. “Mr. Hargrove,” Nancy says, and she doesn’t even flinch. “I’m a very good shot. And I’m telling you to go.”

Neil stares at her, and then at Billy, and then back at her. Finally, he holds his hands up and nods. He looks at Billy. “The next time I see you, you’ll wish you were dead.”

Billy nods. He knows.

And then Neil is gone, and everyone’s screaming, and the kids are running out of the house and Joyce is trying to hug him and Steve is freaking out and Nancy is still holding a gun but all Billy cares about is Max. He reaches out for her and she appears, and he’s not scared right now, not for himself, and he’s not confused. He knows what needs to happen. This isn’t over. They have to go, and they have to go now. He’s not gonna let people get hurt for him. Not anymore.

31. Homo Sapiens

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced abuse, lots of self blame

When I first started this story, all of the scenes I first thought of came at the end- the final scene has been written forever, and there's all these sketches of the last third- like I've known since the first chapter that Nancy was going to stand on the porch and pull a gun on Neil. It feels so weird to be actually writing/publishing them now.

Anyways, hope you like it!

Max can hear a dull roar pounding in her head, and she thinks she might be about to cry, and she feels exactly like she did at the mall, when she thought Billy was going to kill Eleven, when she thought Billy was going to die.

Everyone is being so loud and the world is moving so fast and Neil's truck is still visible in the distance, and Max can't take her eyes off of it until she knows he's gone, knows that Billy is safe.

Everyone is talking and screaming except for Billy, who stands in the center of the storm totally silent, like his dad hadn't just wrapped his hands around his neck and threatened to kill him, like Max hadn't just brought his worst nightmare straight to him.

"Max," he says, and he reaches out for her, and she runs to him, already whispering "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry."

As soon as she's close enough, he grabs her by the wrist and starts pulling her towards the house, cutting through the Byers and Nancy and Steve.

His grip on her wrist doesn't hurt, but it's tight, and for a moment she remembers old Billy, screaming in the car, telling her everything was her fault, that he hated her. He could hate her now, and she would,

too. This is her fault. She brought Neil to him. This is her fault. She could've gotten him killed. She never should've left him, anyways, not even when he asked her to. She knew Neil was going to be mad about the mall, and she LEFT Billy, she LET Neil almost kill him, and she BROUGHT Neil straight to him, and-

Billy almost yanks the front door off the hinges trying to get them inside, seemingly oblivious to how every single person is trying to say something to them, to how everyone is watching them. There's still a gun in Nancy's hand.

He walks so fast he's practically carrying her, and they go straight to the phone, and he still doesn't let go of her wrist, and it still doesn't hurt, but her head is pounding and this was HER fault, and he tucks the phone under his chin while he dials and whispers under his breath, "come on, you old- Come on, come on, fuck fuck fuck-"

There's a voice on the other end, and Billy snaps his head up like he's at attention and pulls Max even closer to his body, so that they're arm to arm.

"Susan," he says, and he's using a voice he never uses to talk to her mom, a voice that's earnest and deep and still. "Susan, it's Billy. Listen to me. Get out of that fucking house. Right now."

xxx

Susan is blubbering about something and Billy's throat hurts and Max looks like she's seconds away from losing it all. He just keeps talking.

"You need to leave, right now. Max is with me. He saw her, okay? He's not gonna forgive you for that. You need to get out and get away RIGHT NOW. Susan. Susan. Susan." She refuses to stop talking, and it's taking everything in Billy not to slam the phone into the wall. Max is staring at him with a petrified look, and he needs, right now, to make Max safe. "LISTEN, Susan. Get in your car, right now. He's on his way back, and he's going to kill you, okay? So get in your car, and go to Linda's. I have Max. I'm bringing her to Linda's. Get out of that house before he gets there."

Max's name must have broken through to her, because she stops her

litany of “where are you what are you talking about what’s happening” and gasps. “Max is safe?” she says after a pause, and Billy nods.

“She’s safe. She’s with me. But you- you have to leave NOW, Susan. Go to Linda’s. I’ll bring Max to you.”

Susan is quiet for far too long, and Max is practically quaking at his side. This is all his fault. His dad has never had a problem with either of them before, and now Billy is making them run away, and all because Billy couldn’t-

“Thank you, Billy.” Susan says it so softly he almost doesn’t register it. “Can I- can I talk to Max?”

If she talks to Max, Max might break down, and then Susan will be on the phone longer, and Neil will get home, and- “You need to leave now, Susan.”

“Tell her I love her, Billy.” Her voice is cracking. “Keep- keep her safe.”

“I will.” He hangs up, and Max takes a horrible shuddering breath.

He puts his hands on her shoulders, crouches down so they’re eye to eye. “Listen up, Maxine. You can freak out later. Right now, though, I need you to call Aunt Linda and tell her you’re on your way, right now, and that she cannot tell Neil you’re there.” He’d call her himself, but Linda has only met Billy twice and she hates him (probably because he’s an asshole) and he knows she’ll listen to Max, knows she’ll do what it takes to protect her (some families actually try to protect children, he guesses). “Maxine. You have to call Linda before Neil does.”

Max nods, and it’s shaky, but she’s the toughest little fucker he knows, and she straightens out her chin and sniffs. “I’m so sorry, Billy. It’s all my fault.”

Something in his chest cracks open. “It’s not, Maxine. It’s my fault, okay? You just gotta- you gotta call Linda.”

She nods again and picks up the phone, carefully dialing like she’s

trying to remember the numbers.

He turns so that he can lean his head against the wall, so he can fucking BREATHE, and that's when he realizes that all of them are standing there watching them, and the gun is gone but it has to be close, and there's a bruise on Steve's chin. There's a bruise on Steve's chin. Billy sees fucking red.

He stands up straight, looking straight at Harrington, the fucking idiot, and hisses: "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Steve's face instantaneously shifts from panic to anger. "What the hell —what the hell is wrong with YOU? I told you to stay INSIDE THE HOUSE—"

"WHY would you TACKLE him?" Steve could've been fucking killed by Billy's fucking DAD, and—

"He was gonna hit Max! What the hell, man! Why did YOU come outside when he was RIGHT THERE—"

Billy freezes. "'Cause he was gonna hit Max."

Steve looks livid. "I had it handled!"

"I would've had it handled if you'd just stayed off him for ten seconds!" Steve didn't have to get hurt, that was never supposed to happen. Billy should've been the one between his dad and Max, not Steve, not Joyce, not anyone but him. (His dad shouldn't have been trying to hit Max at all; his dad shouldn't have been here; Max shouldn't have been trying to protect him).

"You are so fucking dumb, Hargrove! What...what are you even mad about?" The anger is dying in Steve's eyes, and he reaches to touch the bruise on his chin, probably just subconsciously (because that's what you do when a grown man has sucker punched you), but something in Billy breaks wide open. Fuck.

Max pulls at his elbow, and he looks down at her, grateful to look away from the splotch of red on Harrington's chin. "She said she'll tell Neil she hasn't heard from us if he calls." Max swallows. "She says we can stay as long as we need."

He nods. “Are you- are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “He didn’t touch me.” Because of Steve. Because Steve’s a fucking hero. He wants to tell Steve thank you, wants to tell him he’s perfect, wants to... he can’t even look at Steve, though.

He glances up at Nancy. Little Miss Priss herself. “Do you just carry a gun around?”

She shrugs, a nervous smile on her face. “I just thought, you know, I’ve already shot at one Hargrove, why not make it two?”

He smiles despite himself; can’t believe he’s out here getting his ass saved by Steve’s ex. He doesn’t say thank you, because he’s not sure how to. She doesn’t look bothered.

Joyce is watching him (they’re all watching him, it’s like being an animal at the fucking zoo), and he resists the urge to touch his throat, to feel where his dad’s hand was. “Billy, are you okay?”

Max leans into his side, and Steve is looking at him with a face that fluctuates wildly between anger and something open and awful, and Eleven has the biggest eyes he’s ever seen and her mouth is hanging open. “That house, Joyce. How soon- he’s gonna come back. Eventually.”

Joyce nods. “We can start packing now.”

He breathes through his nose, trying to get it all sorted, trying not to look at her children, who are uprooting everything because of him right now.

“Me and Harrington are going to take Max to her aunt’s.” Billy doesn’t even know that he’s going to say Harrington’s name until it’s out of his mouth; doesn’t even know how much he needs Steve to be there until he’s already announced it. He looks at Nancy. “Will you stay here? With them? Until we’re back?”

She nods solemnly. “Don’t worry about us, Billy, we’re fine.”

“You’ll come back?” Eleven asks, eyes looking straight through him, into his soul. “You won’t hide?”

He looks at Joyce, looks at Steve. Steve Harrington, with unbrushed hair and a bruised chin. “I won’t hide,” he promises. “I’ll come back.”

32. Have Outgrown Their Use

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: mentioned child abuse, briefly mentioned suicidal thoughts

Steve wants to kill Billy. He wants to kill Billy and he wants to hug Billy and he wants to hold Billy and say “you’re not pathetic; you never have been,” and he wants to scream at Billy for coming outside and for putting himself in arms length of Neil and he wants to kiss Billy and he wants all of it at once, and Billy has the NERVE to be mad at HIM? That’s bullshit.

But then Billy says that Steve is going with them to Linda’s, and something dissipates in Steve’s chest, because he can’t be mad, not really. He just wants to be near Billy right now. And Billy wants to be near him, and they have to keep Max safe. The rest of it doesn’t have to be said.

Things are moving quickly, and Max is clearly fraying at the edges. She hovers at Billy’s side, watching him as he talks to Joyce, makes Nancy promise to keep them safe. He won’t look Steve in the eyes; Steve can’t look away from him.

Joyce is incredible, apparently willing to adjust her entire life in a matter of hours to protect Billy, and Nancy is a saint, that strength Steve has always loved and needed now in plain sight. (She threatened to kill Billy’s dad; she had pulled a gun on Neil; Steve will never be grateful enough).

Billy’s hands aren’t shaking and his eyes are clear and his voice is steady and he looks right at Steve and promises to come back and Steve feels like he’s going to throw up. Max is still watching Billy with huge eyes, chin trembling, and Steve wants to hug her, too, wants to tell her he’s sorry he let Neil get that close to her, sorry he didn’t start punching as soon as he stepped on the porch, sorry he’s repeatedly let the weight of all of this fall to her.

“Steve?” Billy says, but he’s looking at the front door like Neil will

come back (Neil, who wrapped his hands around Billy's neck; Neil, who laughed in Billy's face and called him pathetic). "Can you? Drive to Indianapolis?"

Steve would drive to fucking California if it meant they could leave Hawkins, if it meant he could be near Billy. "Yeah, yeah, of course."

"We need to go," Billy says, still watching the driveway, and everyone is moving around them, Joyce giving her children orders to get the house ready and the kids already hugging Mac and crying and Nancy, suddenly at Steve's side, small and quiet and sure. She would've shot Neil, he thinks, if she'd felt like she had to. He almost wishes she had. If he'd had the gun, he's not sure—he's not sure if he could kill a human. But if he could, it would be Neil Hargrove.

"Can you do this, Steve?" Joyce asks, and he can't look away from Billy yet but she puts her hands on his shoulder.

"I can do it," he says, trying to focus again, trying to remember that he's here, that Neil is gone, that he has to do this. His voice is off, he thinks. It sounds wrong. It sticks in his throat.

Billy finally looks at him (Billy, who said yes sir when his dad told him he was pathetic; Billy, who had put himself between Steve and his worst nightmare). "Please," Billy says, and his voice is confident but his face is pale. "Steve, I- please."

"I can do it," Steve repeats. He could do anything right now, if Billy asked him to. He can do this.

xxx

Steve was in Billy's bed this morning. Max had walked in on Steve in Billy's bed. And now Steve is climbing into his car and Max is hugging her friends for maybe the last time—she didn't even get to talk to LUCAS, she didn't get to say goodbye—and Billy is at the edge of the porch steps, red bruises on his neck from where his dad had tried to choke him because of Max, and Max isn't sure when the right time to say "so are you guys dating?" is.

Billy doesn't date, anyways. He just flirts with girls in the parking lot

and winks at moms when they stare too long and brings home random girls when he's supposed to be babysitting Max. She rarely sees the same girl twice, not that she cares to. Billy's never dated; not even in California, when all the girls were blonde and surfed and smiled at him like he was a rockstar.

The idea of him liking boys isn't foreign to Max. The boys in California smiled at Billy, too. He smiled back if he thought Max wasn't looking. But the idea of Billy- Steve was the reason Billy said no when Neil told him to get in the car. Max saw that. And that- well, Max can't imagine Billy in anything like that.

She sees the way Steve looks at Billy, though; she knows Steve is real. She sees the way Billy looks at Steve, too. She doesn't know what that look means.

Joyce hugs her and whispers "we will see you again" in her ear. Max doesn't know if it's true; she doesn't know if Joyce thinks it's true. Joyce is going to save Billy. Joyce is going to save Billy, and her mom wouldn't even-

"Don't cry, sweetie," Joyce says, wiping at Max's eyes, even though Joyce's eyes are shining, too. "We'll see you again, I promise."

Max nods and sniffs, and looks back at El, even though they just hugged. She throws her arms around her and says, as seriously as she can, "You're my best friend."

El hugs her back, and repeats back: "Best friends."

Max pulls back just enough to see her face, and whispers: "take care of Billy?"

El nods, and whispers: "I know."

They hug one more time—El is the first girl Max had been able to be friends with; El is the first girl Max could talk to—and Billy clears his throat.

"Maxine..." he's scared Neil will come back before they leave. She knows that. She's scared, too. Steve is in the car, tapping absentmindedly on the steering wheel, and Max feels a deep, awful

pang at the sight of the Beamer, something she can't explain. She wishes it was the Camaro. She wishes the Camaro was still here, and she wishes she was getting into the Camaro with Billy, and that he was going to play awful music way too loud and that he was just dropping her off at school and that she'd get to say "I hate you" and that he'd say "back at you, bitch weasel."

"I'm coming," she says, and takes a deep breath before hugging Will. "Tell Lucas I'll call? And tell Mike I won't miss him at all, and tell Dustin that it's lame he knows the whole song."

Will nods. "I'll tell them. And we'll- the walkie talkies, Max. We'll call you."

She'll see them again, she tells herself.

She climbs in the car.

xxx

Billy had been two years older than Max is now when he'd found out they had to leave California. Everything he'd ever loved had been in California, and his mom was in California, too, supposedly, and when Neil had said they were leaving- well, it hadn't been pretty. He'd said things to Max, things that probably weren't true and were probably awful. He'd screamed at Neil until he went hoarse, screamed through the blood and the pain instead of being quiet like he was supposed to. He'd called Susan a bitch; he'd called Susan worse.

He'd driven the Camaro between his dad's truck and Susan's car the whole way from California to Indiana, and the whole time he wondered what it would be like to gun the engine and ram into Neil's car, wondered what it would be like to end it all then.

And now he's doing it to Max. He's taking her away from her friends and her school and Sinclair and he's making her lose everything she loves and she's taking it like a fucking champ, barely sniffling as they leave the Byers' driveway. This is all his fault. His dad is right, he's pathetic. Max should never have been involved. He should've handled this, on his own, but he didn't, and now Max's life is ruined, and the Byers' lives are ruined, and Nancy is losing her boyfriend,

and Steve has a bruise on his chin, and-

“I’m so sorry,” Max whispers through tears. “I’m really sorry, Billy.”

Billy turns so fast his neck cracks, and Steve hisses through his teeth. She won’t look at him, but tears start pouring, and she buries her face in her hands. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Billy’s stomach drops and for a minute he can’t see straight. He glances at Steve, and Steve nods, and he immediately climbs over the console into the backseat, ignoring the way his ribs scream and his chest aches. He’s pretty sure he almost kicks Harrington in the face.

“Maxine. Maxine, look at me.” She shuffles to give him room next to her, still crying. “Listen, Maxine. This isn’t you, okay? This stuff- it goes way back, way before Neil and I met you. I’m- this isn’t you. I brought it to you, okay? I’m sorry. This is my fault. This is me.”

The brakes squeal and they lurch forward, and Billy automatically bites out “what the fuck, Harrington,” but when he looks up in the mirror Steve is crying, too. Shit.

Steve pulls over on the side of the road—they haven’t even made it a mile, holy shit—and he takes a shaking breath, and then says: “I think it’s my fault.”

Billy can’t help it—he laughs.

Max shakes her head frantically. “No, no, it’s my fault, I-“

“No, Max, ‘cause you’re a kid, and I’m an adult, and I-“

“Harrington, it’s not even your fucking family, so it’s definitely not-“

“It’s not YOUR fault, Billy, I HATE him-“

“Hargrove, you have a shit dad, that’s not on you-“

They overlap for a second, and then silence. Billy clicks his tongue. “It’s not your fault, Maxine, and it’s not yours, Harrington.”

Steve nods. “Maybe not. But it’s definitely not yours, Billy.” He twists

his body around to face them, and he's practically nose to nose with Billy. "You're not pathetic, man, you're not any of the stuff he said." He starts to reach out for Billy's hand, then pulls back. Max is here. "You shouldn't have come out on the porch, and you shouldn't have gotten in between us, but- you're not pathetic, Billy. This isn't your fault. You're..." he takes a deep breath, "you're pretty fucking brave."

Max leans into Billy's side, sidling under his arm, and wraps her arms around him, head in his chest. There's something in his throat, and he can't find it in him to protest, can't figure out the words to explain Steve is wrong. So he nods. "Okay," he says, and puts his hand on Max's head. "Okay. Let's go."

33. All the Strangers Came Today

Notes for the Chapter:

CW: referenced child abuse

Sorry it's been so long! Again, classes are kicking my ass right now. Hope you like it!

They drive in silence for thirty minutes, and Max can't stop sniffling, and she's afraid to move because she knows that when she does Billy's shirt will be covered with snot and tears.

Billy's arms are around her still, his fingers digging into her shoulder a little, and she wonders if he knows that she can hear his heart beat, that she can hear every time he takes a breath.

They've never been close, her and Billy; they've only started hugging in the last 24 hours. Him holding her like this (like she's his sister, like he cares) is a new concept, but Max feels safe, like she does when her mom plays with her hair or holds her while she cries. Billy is her family, she realizes, even though it feels stupid to realize it now, after he's been her stepbrother for years, after they've fought and almost died together, after she's spent weeks of her life crying for him. Billy's her family, and she's about to lose him.

Up front, Steve keeps breathing like there's a rattle in his throat, and every time he does, Billy's heart rate changes. Max knows—she knows in her core, she knows it like she knows her own name—that whatever happened while she was gone, Steve is the only reason Billy stayed. Steve is the only thing that kept Billy from Neil. Max wonders if there's a way she can say thank you and have Steve understand; she wonders if she can ever explain to Steve what he's done.

What if she hadn't called Steve? What if he hadn't been the one who helped her? What if it had been Lucas and Dustin or Eleven? Max can't say, but she feels like it always had to be this way: the only way this worked was if it was Steve. She hopes she didn't ruin his life, hopes he'll forgive her for this. (Steve had called her, and said "Billy and I are running away together," and she had trusted him with Billy;

trusted to know how to be kind and good and all the things she doesn't trust anyone to be with Billy, not even herself). (Steve had put himself between Max and Neil. Is there a way to say thank you for that?)

Steve clears his throat, and Billy jolts a little. "We, um," Max looks up from Billy's embrace, and Steve's eyes are still red, and Billy looks so, so tired. "We need to grab some gas. And some food, probably."

"Yeah, okay," Billy says, looking out the windows, and Steve ducks his head.

"You guys can stay in the car, just- just in case, I guess."

They're scared Neil has followed them, Max realizes with a jolt, and she can't believe she's stupid enough to not have had the same fear. Billy nods again. "Yeah, yeah, that's good."

They park at a gas station, and Max and Billy both stare with wide eyes as Steve pulls out a wad of cash from the glove compartment. "Fuckin' rich kid," Billy mutters, and Steve blushes.

"Shut up, Hargrove. Look, I'll grab us some snacks, and some drinks, and- Max, what do you like? Coke? You like Coke, right?"

Max nods silently, and Steve nods, still flustered.

"I'll be right back," he promises, as if there's anywhere for him to go, and then they watch as he walks inside the gas station, hands pulling at his hair.

"We can leave him, if ya want." Billy drawls, and Max pulls back to look at him. He's serious—actually serious—and he's doing that thing where he won't meet her eyes. "I'm taking you to Linda's and you can be with your mom. But if you- if you don't- are you safe, there?" He licks his teeth. "With Susan?"

Of course I'm safe, she wants to say, it's my mom. But it strikes her that her mom has never been safe for Billy, and his mom wasn't safe for him, and his dad... sometimes she forgets what it means to be

Billy, (and maybe it's not that she forgets so much as it is that she can't fathom it), and whenever she realizes how off her understanding is, she feels like her lungs slowly collapse. "I'll be fine," she whispers, and she knows she will be, but she wishes she could tell Billy that he can stay with her, that he'll be safe there, too. But he won't be, and they both know that.

"And you- you WANT to go there?" He still won't look at her, and his jaw is working. "Because if you don't, we can...we can leave, Max. And I don't- Steve left the keys in the car. We can leave now, if that's what you want."

It's not what she wants. It's not what she wants at all; she wants to be with her mom, she wants to be near her friends, she wants to think that life will be normal one day. She wants- "is that what YOU want, Billy?"

He looks at her, finally, and his eyes are glassy. "I don't know, Max." His voice shakes a little. "Steve, he- and Joyce- I don't know what this all is, still."

Max nods, and she's not sure what he's saying, but she hopes she gets it right. "I think- I think it's good, Billy. I think that this is it. You get to live with Joyce, and you- we shouldn't leave Steve, not here."

"Should Steve be here?" Billy asks quietly, and Max nods again, even though she doesn't know.

"I think Steve is a good thing." She says as softly as she can, and she feels like she's trying not to scare Billy, like if she says the wrong thing he'll get out of the car and run. "I think...he's a good thing."

"What if I'm fucking him over?" Billy asks, hands playing at the hem of his shirt. "What if— he deserves better, Maxine."

"Than you?" Max replies without meaning to, and Billy's face says it all. She can't respond, though, because Steve is good and kind and she wishes she hadn't let him get between her and Neil, but Billy...Billy deserves good things, and kind things, and... "I think he wants to be here, Billy. And that's- that's all you can do, right?" Steve exits the gas station, and Max sees it on Billy's face. "You love him?"

She knows love, she's pretty sure. She loves her mom. She loves Lucas—she really does, in this way she can't explain, where being around him makes her feel something warm and soft where she usually feels angry—and she loves her friends. She loves Billy now, too, even though she's not sure how long she's known that. But she doesn't know the love that's on Billy's face, because Billy's love looks desperate, and Billy's love looks like it takes all of him.

"I don't KNOW," Billy bites out. Steve is almost to the car. "Last chance, Maxine. Me and you. We can run away."

Steve is at the door. Max shakes her head. "This is a good thing, Billy. And we're gonna do it."

Billy must be so lonely, she realizes; Billy must have been lonely his whole life. Max doesn't want to leave him. But he can have people, now, and he can have Ms. Byers, and he can have Steve, and he can have Eleven, and Max will lose him, but it still be okay, because he'll be able to breathe again. She closes her eyes, resting her head back on Billy's chest and listening to Steve rather frantically explain his choice of gas station food. Billy's heart pounds.

xxx

The Hargrove-Mayfield family is not one Steve understands at all; they're an entity that sometimes feels as strange and foreign as the upside down. He can't imagine what it's like to live in a house with someone like Neil, can't imagine what it's like to live in a house with someone like Billy, can't imagine what it's like to live in a house with someone like Max. Steve had spent most of his life in a house alone—the idea of spending his life in a house with people as strong and loud and stubborn and angry as Max and Billy is beyond his reach. He doesn't know what it's like to live in a house where you're afraid.

He had always known that Billy had hated Max and that she had hated him back, and there'd been a point where he thought that if Billy died, Max would be the one to do it. But then Max had slapped a dying boy awake and told him he had to stay alive, and Max had called Steve and asked for help, and now Max Mayfield lay in the backseat of Steve's car, head resting on Billy Hargrove's chest, and Steve thinks they might be the realest family he's ever seen.

"Harrington," Billy says quietly, shifting to catch Steve's eye in the mirror. "She asleep?"

Max's mouth is hanging open a little, and she's drooling. If she's not asleep, she's a damn good actress. "Yeah."

Billy looks relieved, and he shifts more so that he can keep looking at Steve without having to lean. "She's had a shit day."

Steve snorts. "Yeah, I think you could call it that."

Billy smiles, but it's crooked, and he visibly swallows. "Look, Harrington, my dad...I'm sorry about that."

Billy's dad had backhanded Steve. He can still feel the blow, if he thinks about it, and he knows there's a bruise on his chin from when they fought on the ground. Steve has a bruise, and Billy... "Honestly, Hargrove, I'm just glad I got the chance to punch him, so no apology needed." He tries to keep his voice light, and all he wants to say is: I would've killed him for you. I probably should've killed him for you.

Billy guffaws. "Yeah, well, that's more than I ever had the balls to do, so—"

"It's different." Steve says immediately, and Billy rolls his eyes. "I mean it, man, that- that's your dad. To me he's just some guy I hate." That's not true, because Neil is more than some guy, he's everything Steve hates now, but Steve doesn't have words for that. "You- that's your dad, Billy. It's different."

Billy breathes through his nose but doesn't respond. His neck has a bruise on it, and Steve's not sure he'll ever recover from that, from how easily Neil tried to throttle his son, from how naturally the words "yes sir" slipped from Billy's mouth when his dad mocked him. There are instincts and responses built into Billy that Steve will never know, and he wants to know all of them, if only to root them out and kiss Billy until they go away. (He doesn't want to know they exist, actually, just wants to kiss Billy and hold him until everything is gone, until Billy has forgotten everything Neil ever taught him).

"When we get to Linda's..." Billy starts, and a growing anxiety takes

over Steve's brain.

"Are you going to stay there?" Steve blurts out, and Billy actually looks surprised.

"What? No." He smiles, an old Billy smile, sleazy and cocky. "Linda hates me. And Susan- if the only thing between me and Neil is Susan, I might as well take my chances." The smile drops. "No, listen. When we get there, I- I'm gonna have to- we have to go back to Joyce, yeah? I don't trust Neil to not- we need to get back as soon as possible. But Max- I have to—" he breaks off in a scowl, and Steve gets it.

"You'll have to tell her goodbye."

Billy nods, and he blinks quickly. "Yeah, and last time I made her cry, you- I'm not- I'm not always trying to be an asshole, okay?"

Steve nods, his mind moving as rapidly as possible to keep up with whatever Billy's saying. "Yeah, I- I think you're a good guy. You know that, right?"

Billy raises an eyebrow. "A good guy?" he sneers, and it's almost playful.

"Okay, no, maybe not a good guy, but- I know you care about Max. Sometimes people cry 'cause they care about you, man, not 'cause you're an asshole. Just- you don't have to be a dick to say goodbye, okay? It's not your job to make sure Max doesn't miss you. She's gonna miss you, so just- let her be sad, I guess."

Billy stares at him in the mirror. "Fuck you," he says, but there's no bite to it. He pauses, readjusting his body so that Max can lay down a bit more. She's basically snoring now, the poor kid. "Comewithme," he says, all in one breath. "When I move with Joyce. Come- come with me, Steve."

"And do what?" Steve asks, but he already knows the answer is yes. He would say yes to anything that meant he got to stay with Billy, meant he got to know Billy was safe, meant he got to spend his life in the same room as Billy.

"I don't know. But you- come on, Harrington. We could...I don't know."

"The answer is yes," Steve says, and he realizes he's been planning on this since the moment they got in the car. He was always going to follow Billy, even if Billy didn't ask. "And I- I have a question, but I want you to know that whatever you say, the answer stays yes. I want to come, okay? I want to go with you, and nothing will change that." He looks at Max, still asleep, and makes eye contact with Billy, who nods.

"What is it?"

"Are you going to kiss me again?" It's not coy, and it's not playful: Steve genuinely doesn't know. And so much has happened since they kissed, and everything has changed, and it just seems...how could he assume? That Billy still wanted to kiss him? How can he thinks any of that matters right now?

Billy stares back at him, eyes burning, and he says, without a hint of a smile or joke: "I'd like to."

Something warm unfurls in Steve's chest, and he tries not to smile. "Me too."

"That settles that, then." Billy says, and Steve can't help but laugh.

"Yeah, that settles it."

34. And It Looks As Though They're Here to Stay

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: child abuse (verbal and physical); emotional neglect; some suicidal thoughts

This chapter was really hard for me to write. Susan is such a complicated character, and I've never wanted to write her off or, alternatively, pretend like she's some kind of saint. All of the main characters have such different relationships to her, too, and I wanted to be able to understand/explore that while still seeing her as complex. It took me forever to write this and to figure it out, and I hope it works.

Anyways, hope you enjoy the chapter! Happy Holidays :)

They have to wake Max up when they hit the Indianapolis city limits, though once she gets them to the right exit she ends up being almost no help at all.

"I don't, just, memorize street names," she grumbles after they've circled yet another wrong street, and Billy rolls his eyes and says: "Jesus, how old are you? You were here THIS MORNING."

Steve feels a sense of panic, like if he and Billy don't return to Joyce as soon as possible there will be no way to ward off the impending doom, but he can tell that Billy and Max are reluctant to actually find the house. He can hardly blame them—he doesn't want to leave Max, and he doesn't want Billy to leave Max, and he wishes that there was a way to guarantee that Max got to be gifted with a new mother, one who wasn't Susan, one who hadn't let her stepson lay bleeding on a mattress for over a week. (He knows that Susan is more than that, that Max obviously still loves her, that it's all complicated, but in the last week Steve has learned to evaluate people solely on the basis of their relationship to Billy, and if he thinks too much about Susan's role in all of this he sees red).

For a moment, as he takes another right turn that he's fairly certain he's already taken, Steve fights the urge to say "let's just leave." He can picture a life so clearly, a life just like this: him and Billy and Max and a car—alone, free, untethered. Him always driving with no destination, Billy and Max always bickering over directions and food and leg space. (What does it say about him, that in his wildest dreams he's still a glorified babysitter? He's not sure). They could leave everything behind—dads that are horrific, moms who don't do their jobs, parents who just don't care. Towns that you can't breathe in, places that are haunted by everything evil and dark. Ruined malls full of fucking Russians.

Joyce, who wants to give Billy a home. Nancy, who is willing to kill for Billy. Eleven, who looks at Billy like she understands him. Will, who watches Billy silently but carefully; Will, who might actually one day be able to talk to Billy about what it means to be Flayed. Jonathan, who is willing to give up his life to help someone he has no reason to like.

Steve can't ask Billy to even consider leaving these people; he can't justify theoretically encouraging Billy to leave. Billy could still run at the first chance, Steve's sure of it—he won't be the one that pushes him. Billy deserves a family, and Steve is going to make sure he gets there. (Billy wants Steve to have the same family; Billy wants Steve to share these people with him. Steve just wants to be wherever Billy is).

"Oh wait, I think this is it!" Max says with the same confidence that she's had about the last three streets. "Take a left here. I think this is it."

"Does this look familiar?" Steve asks Billy, who shrugs.

"Fuck if I know," Billy drawls. "I haven't been here since...since what, Max, the first Thanksgiving?"

"You were at the first Thanksgiving," Max replies with a smirk, "and we were never invited back."

Billy grins from ear to ear, and Steve almost says it again: let's just leave. But Billy deserves a family, and Steve is being selfish, and Billy

needs to, just this once, not run, and-

“That’s Susan’s car.” The shift that comes over the siblings is total in nature and happens in a matter of milliseconds. One second they’re smiling and laughing, and the next they’re quiet and tense, pressed shoulder to shoulder.

“This is the right house,” Max affirms in a stiff voice, and Steve pulls into a stranger’s driveway.

Billy’s breathe hitches as two women appear at the front door immediately, and Max reaches out to open the door but leaves her hand on the handle, fingers frozen.

“Billy...” she whispers, and Billy shakes his head.

“This is a good thing,” he says quietly, “and we’re gonna do it.”

She nods once like a soldier and clammers out of the car. One of the women—Susan, Steve does recognize her, even though the recognition is vague—bursts into tears and half runs to Max, wrapping her in her arms.

Billy and Steve stay frozen in the car, watching as Susan cups Max’s face in her hands, tries to detangle Max’s hair with her fingers. She loves Max, that’s easy to see. Steve wants to get out of the car and scream at her: Billy was right there; Billy was right there and you did nothing; no one told Billy they loved him for seven years.

“I need to talk to her,” Billy says quietly, muscles still tense. “To Susan. I- I have to talk to her.”

Steve nods. “I can go with you.”

“No, I-“ Billy shakes his head, fingers tugging at his shirt. “I need to do it alone. There’s some stuff I have to say that- look, will you...”

“I won’t leave,” Steve says, echoing the promise of the last few days. Billy has to be told that he’s not being abandoned, Steve is starting to understand that, and Steve will say it every hour if it means it will get through to Billy at all.

Billy nods, and then cuts his eyes to Steve sharply. “If Linda says anything about me ignore her, okay? I was, like, a fourteen year old asshole.”

Steve snorts. “Hard to believe you could do worse at fourteen than you did when I met you.”

“That’s fair,” Billy says with a grin. He looks back at Susan and Max, who are both staring at the car window now. He reaches forward and claps a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Let’s go ahead and do this, then.”

xxx

The last time Billy saw Susan, he’d been laying on his floor, blood in his mouth, Neil standing over him. Neil had stopped yelling a while ago (Neil likes to avoid yelling, when he can, and why yell when being quiet is just as effective?) and he was quietly and calmly explaining to Billy how bad he had fucked up, what a disappointment he is, how he’d ruined the lives of everyone he’d touched. (Neil was just thinking about himself, about Billy’s mom, about Max, about Susan. He had no idea about Heather, or the girl, or all the missing people scattered through Hawkins. He had no idea Billy’s a million times worse than even Neil can imagine). Billy laid on the floor, cradling his ribs, surrounded by all of his belongings, blood in his eyes. Neil could be gearing up to kill him, he thought. This could be it for him.

He closed his eyes, trying to focus on any voice other than his dad’s. What would his mom say, if she was here? (She had known this was coming, and she hadn’t cared. She still left). What would Max do, if Neil killed him? (They could be a happy family, if he wasn’t here. Max, Neil, Susan—they could be a sweet family, who only fought about normal things, who all smiled and hugged and loved each other). Billy couldn’t think of a single reason NOT to die—he was tired of living with this, tired of hearing Heather’s screams in his sleep.

“Open your FUCKING eyes and LISTEN to me when I talk to you!” Neil hooked Billy’s side with the tip of his boot and flipped him over, and Billy let out a half scream into the carpet. “Shut up,” Neil spit, and then he crouched down, grabbing Billy by the jaw to force eye

contact. “Do you understand how lucky you are that Max made it out alive? That none of those kids died? Do you realize how many people you endangered, all because you were SELFISH and STUPID?” (Billy was still fuzzy on what all he had done, but he was pretty sure he’d endangered, at the very least, all of Indiana). “The VERY least you can do is take some RESPONSIBILITY for everything you’ve done. You understand me?”

There was a knock at the door. “Yes sir,” Billy mumbled, and his tongue felt thick and slow, and there was blood on his teeth.

“Neil?” Susan asked, cracking open the door. Neil stood quickly, making his way to the door and standing in the gap. She saw Billy, though: Billy saw her face go white, saw her put a hand over her mouth, heard her gasp. “Neil,” she whispered, but it didn’t matter.

Susan saw Billy, and nothing happened, nothing changed. She knew what had happened, and she knew what Billy looked like when Neil was done with him, and she didn’t do anything. At the time, Billy hadn’t blamed her. He deserved it, and she wasn’t his mom, and she was Neil’s wife.

Now, though, watching her hug and cry over Max, something in Billy’s stomach clenches, and his eyes are hot. He doesn’t know what it is, but he thinks of Joyce, cleaning the blood out of his hair, and he thinks of Steve, shoving his body in between Neil and Max. He has to talk to Susan; he has to be sure.

Susan’s face when she sees him is almost identical to the face she made last time she saw him: face pale, hand to her mouth.

“Billy,” she whispers, and her voice sounds just like it did the last time Billy saw her, and his throat tightens. “Billy, please, I-“ she steps away from Max, a hand outstretched, and Billy does a full body flinch.

“Don’t touch him,” Steve growls from behind him, and Billy wants to tell him to calm down, that Susan isn’t bad, she’s just annoying, but his body is frozen. Max slips between him and Susan, chin jutted out, facing her mom. Jesus, she’s a strong kid. Better than Billy ever was, better than Billy ever has been.

Susan starts crying immediately, and Linda moves forward, arms crossed across her chest. Billy watches her for a second, waiting for her to yell at him, waiting for her to tell him to leave. All she does, though, is place a hand on her sister's shoulder and nod at Billy like she understands something. Billy nods back, feeling some mobility return. He breathes in through his nose, licks his teeth.

"It's fine," he calls to Steve over his shoulder, and he places a hand on Max's shoulder, mirroring Linda, and repeats: "it's fine." Max looks at him and he nods, and she gives him a small, sad smile. "I need to talk to your mom," he says quietly, "alone."

She nods back. "That's fine."

He looks up at Susan and Linda and repeats, in a voice that he hopes is firm: "I need to talk to you, Susan. Inside."

xxx

Max watches Billy and her mom disappear through the front door, and she clenches her fist at her side. She doesn't want Billy to yell at her mom; she doesn't want her mom to cry and act like she never did anything wrong. She doesn't want them to be alone in a room together, and she's not sure what Billy wants to say to her mom. Steve moves behind her, puts a hand on her shoulder exactly where Billy had.

"You okay?" He asks quietly, and Max thinks about how angry he had been, only seconds ago, at her mom. Steve had talked to her mom the same way he talked to Neil. He loves Billy; he has to.

Aunt Linda looks at Steve, head tilted. "And who are you?"

"This is Steve," Max says quickly. "He's our..." she breathes in deeply, suddenly unsure of the word. "He's my friend," she finishes lamely, as if the word 'friend' could possibly explain the fact that he's saved Max's life before, the fact that he's saved Billy, the fact that he climbed through Billy's window because Max asked him to and hasn't left since.

Aunt Linda smiles, clearly confused. In a voice that's not unkind but

is stilted, she says: “Bit of an age gap between you two, isn’t there?”

Steve moves his hand from Max’s shoulder, shoves both his hands into his pockets. “Me and Billy went to school together. And Max is good friends with Dustin, my- my little brother.”

Dustin would scream if he heard Steve say that; he probably wouldn’t shut up about it for months. Max smiles despite herself, thinking about how annoying Dustin would be if he knew Steve had called him his brother. As soon as he says it, though, Max can’t help but feel like it’s true: how could any biological brother love Dustin more than Steve does? How could any little brother care about Steve more than Dustin does?

“And you and Billy are friends?” Aunt Linda continues, confused smile still in place. Max can understand the confusion: Steve, even in casual clothes and unwashed hair, is still obviously a rich prep, the antithesis of everything Billy has always been.

“Yeah, we’re, um, we’re best friends.”

Max smiles again, but, at the same time, she has to fight the urge to hug Steve. Steve is Dustin’s brother; Billy is her brother; Steve loves Billy; Billy loves Steve; Max is Billy’s little sister now. “He’s been helping us a ton,” Max says, and she’s shocked to hear the words out in the open, to talk about it so openly with anyone, much less someone outside of the Byers’ house. “With Neil. He helped us move Billy, and...” her voice cracks, which is embarrassing. “He’s been helping us a lot. He helped Billy hide.”

Aunt Linda’s face softens, and she nods, lip pursed. “Well, thank you then, Steve.”

Steve has got to be one of the most awkward people Max has ever known; she doesn’t believe any of the shit the boys say about how Steve used to be the coolest person in school. He shifts from foot to foot, hands buried deep in his pockets. “Any time,” he responds, as if saving someone from their murderous dad is a task that Steve is asked to help out with every Tuesday.

Max doesn’t know, though. Steve has saved Dustin’s ass multiple

times; he's fought Russians and monsters; he's hit people with cars; he came the second Max called. He made Billy want to stay, somehow. Maybe this is just who Steve is.

Max can't stand the thought of leaving Billy. But she can leave Billy with Steve; she's known that, even subconsciously, since the beginning. Billy is safe with Steve.

xxx

"Your husband," Billy says the second they're alone, determined not to give Susan any sort of head start, "tried to fucking HIT Max."

Susan, who was already weepy, starts sobbing. Billy has to resist the urge to just scream at her to LISTEN, to understand that what he's saying MATTERS, but, at the same time, Billy's spent a good portion of the last 24 hours crying, so it's not like he has any high ground to stand on.

"Susan, please don't cry," he says, and he's actually surprised by how soft his voice is, by how quickly the anger bleeds out. It must shock her, too, because she looks up from her hands with wide eyes, chin quivering.

"I'm sorry," she sniffs. "I just didn't- thank you, Billy, thank you so much, for keeping her safe, for bringing her to me, for calling me, I- thank you, Billy, we'd be lost without you."

He wonders if she's forgotten he's the root of the problem, if she remembers that Max was only in danger because of him. That's not what he expected her to say, and it takes a moment for him to remember what's important here. "Listen, Susan, none of that- look. Max isn't safe near Neil, okay? She's not. She was before, but now she's not, and what..." he swallows, and his left hand is shaking. "What happened today? There's no coming back from that. Max will never be safe around Neil again, okay?"

Susan chokes back a sob, but she nods. "I know."

"Do you?" Billy asks, and his voice is picking up again, and there's a bit of an edge to it, but this is too important for him to try to be nice

now. “Because before I leave here, I need to know that you understand. Maxine is fourteen, okay? Do you know what happened when I was fourteen?” She knows, he knows that she does, but he says it anyways. “Neil broke my fucking arm. Max doesn’t deserve that. Max cannot be in the same room as him EVER again, okay?” His voice breaks a little, and his chest aches. “She’s just a kid.”

Something passes over Susan’s face, something that Billy doesn’t recognize, something that reminds him briefly of Joyce. “You were just a kid,” she whispers, and his breathe hitches. “You were just a kid, and...I’m sorry, Billy.”

Billy shakes his head. He can’t do this right now. “This is about Max. I’m not- this is about Max. I need you to tell me—I need you to LOOK at me and TELL me—that you’ll never go back to Neil. Because he won’t hesitate. Max HAS to be safe, so you HAVE to promise to never go back to him. You CANNOT let him be near Max again, okay? You’re her MOM.” There’s tears in his eyes, which is horrifying, and Billy doesn’t want to think about it. “You’re her mom; you have to keep her safe.”

Susan stares at him, tears still in her eyes, but strangely composed. Slowly, tentatively, she reaches out a hand and places it on his. “I’m leaving him, I promise. He- he’ll never see Max again.” She sniffs, and wipes at her eyes, letting go of his hand. “I know that you have every reason in the world to doubt me, but- I’ve done this before, Billy. I’ve left a marriage for Max before, and I can do it again. You- you can trust me with this.”

Billy believes her now, and in the set of her jaw and the crease between her eyebrows she looks, every so faintly, like Max. She and Max never talk about Max’s dad—Billy had always assumed he left Susan, if only because he couldn’t imagine Susan ever making an executive decision. Now, though, he’s not sure who Susan is. Susan has always gotten Max out of the house when Neil’s been mad at him; she’s always been the first to make peace between Neil and Billy at the dinner table. Billy had always thought it was because she refused to confront the truth, because she felt awkward being a part of whatever happened between her husband and step son. Now, though, he thinks maybe he had missed the full picture. She’ll protect Max; she always has.

"I believe you," he says slowly, and he backs up from Susan, makes sure she's looking him in the eyes. "But listen to me: if you go back to him, if you EVER let him near Max again, I'll know. And I- I swear to fucking God, Susan, you will never see Max again. I'll kidnap her, I don't care, and you will NEVER see her again. I can't protect her right now, and I trust that you can. But if you can't? If you decide not to?" He doesn't pull any of his old tricks: he doesn't smile with all his teeth, he doesn't fake laugh. He just stares at her, voice even and low. "If you let Max get hurt, I don't give a fuck what happens to you. I'll do whatever it takes to keep Max safe."

Susan breathes in shakily, but she nods. "If I went back to Ne- if I went back to him," she says, keeping eye contact with Billy, "I would expect nothing less."

35. Oh, You Pretty Things

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced child abuse, referenced child neglect

I would like to apologize to everyone and also Jesus for taking so long to upload. I haven't abandoned this thing and don't intend to! I just got very, very caught up in school. I hope you guys like this chapter, though!

A list of things Steve wants to say to Susan Hargrove:

1. He was right there
2. He was right there and you left him
3. He was right there and I had to come climb through his window and pull him out your house and take him to a woman who had every reason to hate him and that was the only way he could find someone to care
4. He was right there and you never thought to tell him he wasn't pathetic or that he was good or that he didn't deserve this or that someone should take care of him or that—
5. You let a fourteen year old do it
6. You let a FOURTEEN YEAR OLD-

Billy emerges from the house, a crying Susan behind him. Billy looks stable, or, at least, relatively stable, considering that most of his interactions with Steve have been anything but. Steve's chest aches a little at the sight of him, and all he wants to do is hug him, to hold him, to tell him he loves him. (He LOVES him? Jesus Christ, Steve is such an idiot. Robin is going to kill him, and he'll deserve it). He pushes that last thought from his mind as forcefully as he can and shoves his hands deeper into his pockets.

Billy nods to him, briefly, and Susan takes her place next to her sister, who wraps an arm around her shoulders and whispers something in her ear. Billy looks at them, and opens his mouth to say something, but, after deep breath, he closes it again, looking furtively

to Steve. Jesus Christ, Steve loves him.

“Billy,” Max whispers, and Billy snaps his eyes towards her, his mouth opening again. Billy and Steve need to leave now; everyone here knows what needs to happen. It’s not fair, though, Steve wants to yell, they shouldn’t have to separate. Susan should have to live with this, not Billy. Not Max. The pain of separation shouldn’t be on them. But Max has to separate from someone, at the end of the day, and Susan is her mom. Which is shit, isn’t it? Max deserves a better mom. Max deserves a mom that wouldn’t- that doesn’t- Max loves her mom, and Steve feels sick.

“Hey bitch,” Billy says in a quiet voice, and both of the women jolt a little while Steve fights back a grin. “We need to talk, don’t we?”

“Don’t call me that,” Max retorts, but she has a small smile on her face. “And yeah. I guess so.”

xxx

They leave Steve with her mom and Aunt Linda, which feels like a mistake, but she trusts her aunt to keep any bloodshed from happening. She brings Billy to the guest room where she stays when she comes to Aunt Linda’s, because it’s separated enough that no one can hear anything they say through the walls and she doesn’t have to worry about her mom.

As soon as she shuts the door behind her, they both start talking as quickly as possible.

“Listen, Maxine, if anything happens, at all, you HAVE to-”

“You’ll call me, right? You can’t run away, okay? You HAVE to-”

“And I will come find you, but you can’t tell anyone-”

“I swear to God, Billy, I will NEVER forgive you if you-”

She refuses to let him determine the course of this conversation, but it occurs to her that she has no idea what he’s been saying, and the look on his face tells her he’s similarly lost. She pauses. Sometimes, she thinks, she’s so used to fighting with Billy that she forgets there’s

other forms of communication. When she goes quiet, he shuts up immediately, looking at her with a crease between his eyebrows.

She points at herself, suddenly feeling like El. “I go first.”

He looks like he’s about to disagree, but she talks over his moment of hesitation. “Listen, Billy, you’re my brother, okay? And I know—it’s stupid—you’ve BEEN my brother, but that’s when you were my stepbrother, but now you’re my—you’re my BROTHER, because it doesn’t matter, yeah? That our parents aren’t the same? Because Steve and Dustin, they’re brothers, and they don’t even live together, and we- you and I- you’re my brother now, okay? You can’t back out of that. So when you leave, you have to—I mean it, Billy, I’m gonna be so mad at you—you have to STAY my brother. And you have to call me. And you have to- you have to REMEMBER me, okay? Because I’m your- I’m your-“ she can’t say it, because she’s on the verge of crying, tears hot and angry behind her eyes, something made out of cement lodged in her throat.

Billy stares at her, his eyes huge and intense, and his whole body is on edge, the way it used to be right before he snapped. She sniffs, trying to rein all the emotions back in, but Billy, after a moment, whispers, in a voice that’s equally shocked and steady: “you’re my sister, Max, of course you are.”

Something inside of her breaks. Billy’s arms are around her in an instant, and he holds her head to his chest, and she sobs, real, angry sobs, and she hates that this has happened twice in one day, now, that she can’t pull it together when Billy’s the one with the awful dad.

“What the fuck, Max, you thought I was gonna just go and never talk to you again?”

She sniffs, and his shirt really must be covered with her snot by this point today. “You said that last time, you said I should never talk to you again, and I don’t WANT to do that, Billy, I don’t-”

He takes her by the shoulders and pushes her back, holding her at arms’ length so he can look into her eyes. “I was being an asshole, okay? Because I didn’t want Neil to hurt you. You ARE my sister,

Max. Fuck, you're the only one in this family worth a shit. You're...that's what I was trying to say, okay? If anything happens, anything at ALL, with Neil, or with your mom, or with anyone, call me, and no matter what, I'll come get you, okay?" His voice is determined, and there's some grit to it. "I mean it. I'll come get you, and we'll leave this whole fucking family behind, okay? I know your mom- she loves you, and you love her. But if she EVER- I don't care what happens, you got that? You have to call me."

She nods, and he shakes his head. "You have to say it, Max."

"I'll call you. If anything happens. I'll call you."

He wraps her in a hug again, and, so briefly she almost thinks she's imagined it, he kisses the top of her head before stepping back from her again. "Good," he says, his voice suddenly scratchy, and he rubs at his eyes. "We're gonna- we're gonna have to go."

"I know," she says around the pain in her chest. "And you'll be- it'll be good, and you'll be happy with them."

He looks at her, uncertainty in his eyes. "Happy?" he echoes, and Max realizes with a jolt that she's not sure if she's ever seen him happy before. She's seen him excited about something, she's seen him having fun, but happy...

She reaches out and takes her hand in his. "You asked me, remember? When I took you to Will's house? You asked me what I wanted from you."

It takes a second, but he nods. "You said to stay alive. And not be an asshole."

She snorts. "Well, obviously, that was stupid, because you're always going to be an asshole." He grins a little, and she takes a deep breath. "But now what I want is...I just want you to be able to breathe, you know? And then, when you can do that, I want...I want you to be happy, Billy."

Something that she can't identify shifts in his face, but he nods, solemnly, his hand still in hers. "Max," he starts, voice a little shaky,

“if you hadn’t been there-”

“Yeah, but I was.” She clears her throat. “Because I’m your sister.”

xxx

Max hugs Steve before they leave, and whispers something that Billy can’t hear in his ear, and then she says, with a frown, “Look, obviously I don’t want anyone to know this, but I will miss Dustin,” and Steve laughs and says “yeah, yeah, I’ll make sure he knows.”

Brothers, Max had called Dustin and Steve, and that word bounces around in Billy’s head a little bit until it’s his turn to say goodbye to Max, AGAIN. They don’t hug this time, while he’s standing outside of the car, but she nods at him and says, a crooked smile in place, “see you later, asshole,” and he nods back and says “back at you, bitch weasel.”

He doesn’t say goodbye to Susan. He doesn’t feel like he needs to.

It takes a few minutes for either him or Steve to talk after they start driving, but then, right as he’s about to say ‘so how was Linda’ Steve says: “God, I’m sorry, I know she’s Max’s mom, but I fucking hate her so fucking much. I mean, JESUS.” He slams a hand against the steering wheel, and there’s a million things for Billy to say right now, a million things he needs to communicate before they’re back in Hawkins. But all he can think, looking at Steve now, is that happy suddenly seems like an attainable goal.

Notes for the Chapter:

Some notes on this chapter: I don’t hate Susan, and I don’t intend for people to. She’s a complicated figure, and everyone in the story has a different relationship to her. Steve’s understanding of her is super simple, and is only meant to represent his understanding of things, not who she actually is.

36. Don't You Know

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced abuse, pretty strong self loathing, standard Billy stuff

The alternative title to this chapter is just ‘Boys Monologuing.’

Maybe breaking the silence just to say he hates Max’s mom wasn’t Steve’s best idea, but the look that Billy gives him after he says it—eyes soft, suddenly unguarded—makes him think that maybe it wasn’t his worst idea, either.

Billy seems to catch himself, because he snaps his attention back to the road, looking away from Steve, splaying his hands across the dashboard and tapping out something. Billy has nice hands—strong, calloused, with long fingers—hands that had been in Steve’s hair, on his hips, less than twenty hours—JESUS, Steve has got to pull it together.

“She could be worse,” Billy says, still fixated on the windshield, and Steve has to try to think about something other than Billy’s hands.

“What?”

“Susan. She could be—you know, she’s annoying as shit, but she’s gonna leave him. She’s gonna protect Max. I mean...” he shrugs, looking over his shoulder at something unseen. “More than my mom did, so, ya know.”

Steve scoffs. “Yeah, not sure your mom is the gold standard of moms, so not sure comparing Susan to her helps Susan’s case.”

“Hey, FUCK you,” Billy spits out immediately, venomous and spiteful, his face completely rearranging from the somber, soft spoken person he’d been two seconds ago. “My mom loved me, so just- FUCK you, man.”

Steve’s clearly made a misstep, and Billy’s obviously having a rough

day, but, shit, Steve got bitch slapped by Billy's dad this morning AND he watched Billy believe lies about himself AND he listened to Susan cry while Billy and Max watched out for themselves, so Steve's had a bad day, too. He should let this go, though, he should let Billy just rest, just for a moment.

Fuck it.

"You can't- protecting your kid is just bare minimum shit, okay? It's not— I'm sorry, man, I'm not trying to say she didn't love you," (I'm sure she did, how could she not, how could anyone not love you, why is this HAPPENING to Steve right now), "but, I mean, what's the point of loving someone if you're not going to at least try to protect them when you can? Look at Joyce!"

It occurs to Steve suddenly that he has no idea how caught up Billy is. Surely Max filled him in, right? Surely he knows everything. But, at the same time, Billy went from being flayed to being hospitalized to laying on his bedroom floor in pretty rapid succession, and at no point did Steve check in to see 'hey, has anyone filled you in yet on the monster that possessed you?' There's not time now, though, because he needs to make this point. He can do it later.

"Three times now—three times AT LEAST—that woman has gone pretty much nuts trying to protect Will and Jonathan and El, and I mean—she fought RUSSIANS, man, to try to protect them, and I think- I think that's what you do, when you love someone. I think you protect them."

Steve once barged into the house of a boy he'd just bullied and beaten a monster with a baseball bat. Steve had once carried that same baseball bat in a tunnel full of demodogs, sure he was about to die, to try to make sure some twelve year olds made it out alive. Steve had tackled a grown man that he hated this morning, because he tried to hit Max. That's what love is, right? It has to be. That feeling in his chest, that instinct to put himself between something awful and something vulnerable—if that's not love, what is?

Billy's staring at him, and Steve can't tell if he's angry or not. His eyes are cloudy, and his jaw is set. "Not everyone can be selfless all the time, Harrington. Sometimes all you can do is protect yourself."

"Maybe," Steve says, "but that's sure as fuck not what you do."

Billy squints. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You protected El, at Starcourt. We all saw. And you- man, this whole time, you've been obsessed with keeping Max safe, even when you guys are screaming at each other and stuff. That's what- how many times now have you told me you're trying to keep Neil from hurting Max? From hurting Joyce? Dude, we were going to run away" -holy shit, they had been planning to run away together, and it feels like a million years ago but it was yesterday- "just to feel like Joyce was safer. So don't give me that bullshit, because..." Steve pauses, trying to collect his thoughts and suddenly realizing that maybe he doesn't know what love is. "You're a better person than your mom was, Billy, you've already proven that. I know she loved you. I know Susan loves Max. But you can—they could've done more."

Something shutters off in Billy's face, and he looks away from Steve again, starts tapping on the dashboard again. "Nah," he whispers, "I'm not- I always wanted to be like my mom. Everyone likes her. She never yelled, you know? Never got mad. Nice to everyone. Never even- and Neil was such an asshole to her, sometimes, just because he could be, and he always said I was too much like her, but I'm not, you know? 'Cause I'm not- I don't know how to be like that. I'm just," he takes a horrible, shuddering breath, "I'm like Neil, really. And that's why- you can't blame her for leaving me, and you can't blame Susan for watching out for just Max, because- they knew. I'm not like my mom. I'm like Neil."

Steve suddenly feels like he can't breathe, and he grips the steering wheel tight, tries to focus on the ride and fall of his own chest.

When Steve doesn't say anything, Billy continues, somehow even smaller than before: "I killed a lot of people, man, and even before that, I- you were there. You know I'm like my dad. I'm not- you're right, about Joyce, about Max, about all those stupid dumbass kids. They should be protected. But don't- my mom and Susan did what they had to, you know? Don't think less of them, just because- I'm not Max, man. I'm not any of Joyce's weird ass kids. I don't- it's different."

For the second time today, Steve frantically pulls off the side of the road, and for the second time today, Billy responds with a “what the FUCK, Harrington,” but Steve doesn’t care about any of that.

“You can’t fucking SAY SHIT LIKE THAT!” Steve says, and he scares himself with how quickly he transitions into screaming, with how fast his heart is pounding, with the way his knuckles are white on the steering wheel. “You can’t- what the FUCK, Billy?”

Billy eyes are narrowing, and he’s getting angry, Steve can tell. “Harrington, what kind of BULLSHIT are you on-”

“No, Billy, listen to me! Goddamn!” Steve slaps the steering wheel with the heel of his hand, accidentally hitting the horn, and something about the sharp noise brings him back for a moment, to the situation, and that maybe the people he WANTS to yell at aren’t in this car, and maybe yelling isn’t the best way to explain all of this. He holds his hand to his chest for a second, a dull pain from where he’d hit the steering wheel already subsiding, taking a breath while he can feel the weight of Billy’s eyes on him.

Steve breathes in, breathes out, and slowly turns so that he can face Billy, and Billy has already shifted in his seat so that his whole body faces Steve and his body is braced partially on the dashboard, and he looks wary, and he looks confused, and Steve feels like crying.

“Billy,” he says, as softly as he knows how to, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have- God, I feel like I keep fucking up, you know? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled, I’m not mad at YOU, I just-”

“I don’t care if you yell at me,” Billy says, still seemingly genuinely confused but bordering on defensive again. “What is your PROBLEM-”

“You don’t deserve any of this shit, okay? And you’re not- Jesus fucking Christ, you are not Neil. I mean it, you’re better than your mom, you are, you’re better than Susan, and you’re not- man, how can you even say that? That it’s okay for them to let you get hurt? That you’re not- like, what the hell? You don’t deserve this. People should have been protecting you this whole time. You are- I know you were a dick, I was THERE, you BROKE MY NOSE, and that’s not-

you were a KID, Billy, and they're your parents, they're the people who are supposed to keep you safe, and you can't act like- they didn't protect you because they're bad people, okay? Not 'cause you didn't deserve to be protected. You deserved to be safe, just as much as Max, just as much as Will, just as much as Eleven- you were a KID, I don't care if you were an asshole. So don't say shit like that, that you're like your dad, that you understand why your mom and Susan didn't help. It's not different, okay? You were a kid, and you're still...people can't just hurt you because they want to, Billy, you deserve better than that." Steve gets so lost in his own words that it's hard for him to focus on anything other than his own heartbeat pounding, and Billy's face has undergone ten different mood shifts while he's been talking, but it's landed on that one from earlier, the one that's soft and confused and less guarded than any Billy Steve's ever really seen that wasn't crying in the floor.

"Harrington," Billy starts, and his voice is cracking, and he looks like he's trying to physically disappear into the seat of the car, "I killed a shit load of people, okay? It was- I don't know if you guys have run the numbers, yet, but it was a lot. Heather, Steve, I let it kill Heather. And kids, and old people, and Heather is DEAD, so don't give me that bullshit, about me being like the kids, because I—"

"That wasn't YOU, Billy, you were flayed—"

"And what the FUCK do you know about that?" Billy snaps. "I was supposed to kill Karen, and I didn't, so I was able to fight, and after that, I just didn't fight hard enough, okay? Those people DIED because I didn't fight hard enough, and the last thing they saw was ME, okay? The last thing Heather saw was ME."

"That wasn't you," Steve says, and his chest hurts, and he can remember the pure panic of the kids thinking Will was possessed by a monster, of not knowing what was their friend and what wasn't, and he remembers seeing a Billy that wasn't Billy and a Billy that was Billy, and he remembers El holding Billy's face like he was a child and something human coming back to him. "No one could've fought that thing, and it's not your fault. It wasn't you, it was the Mind Flayer."

"SUCH A STUPID FUCKING NAME!" Billy screams, and he's crying

now, and there's a vein on his forehead. "You guys and your stupid nerd games give everything STUPID FUCKING NAMES, AND YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT! It PICKED me, okay? It KNEW. It picked me, because it knew who I am, and what I am, and that- it knew, okay? It knew everything about me and it PICKED me."

"It picked you 'cause you were there," Steve whispers, and he's crying, too, and he's trying not to, because this is getting ridiculous, how much he and Billy cry in cars now. "Same reason it picked Will: you were there."

"How can you know that, though?" Billy asks, the anger gone as quickly as it came, exhaustion taking its place. "Because, I...it was me, Steve, no one else. It picked me, and why else would it, if not because-

"You were there, Billy, that's the only reason." Steve doesn't know why it picked Billy. He doesn't know if it's because Billy was strong or because he was charismatic or because he's got a feral streak or if Steve's right, and it's because it was the closest living body it could find when it needed one. But he knows it wasn't why Billy thinks it was; it's not because Billy somehow deserved it. Billy's chest is heaving, now, and he's frozen against the car door, still watching Steve. "Billy, you...you don't deserve all this shit, and I mean it, and...look at the people that love you, man, look at Max, look at Joyce. They're two of the best people I know, and, I mean, Max is terrifying, and she's a little nuts, and she was- she was gonna fight her MOM for you today, she's literally spent every day since Starcourt trying to keep you safe. And Joyce, she's only known you for what, two weeks? And she loves you, you know she does, and she was there, Billy, she knows what happened at Starcourt, and she still...she's basically adopting you, yeah? Because she knows that's what you deserve, and she LOVES you, and Max loves you, and they wouldn't- you're not what you think you are, Billy, you're someone that people love, and you're someone that should be loved, and none of this—not your mom, not your dad, not Starcourt—is because you deserve it." There are tear tracks running down Billy's face still, and he looks scared, almost, and Steve feels so desperate in this moment, needing so badly to know that Billy can understand or believe any of what's he's saying. "And I- Billy, in the last week, I've completely

changed my life around you, and never once have I wondered if you deserved it. I've wondered if I'm losing my mind, and I've wondered if I was good enough for you, and I've wondered if I was doing the right thing to help you, and I've wondered if I even know you, but never—not once, I swear to God, not once—have I ever wondered if you deserved to be safe or not. I've known, man, since the moment I saw you in your room, that I'd do whatever I needed to to help keep you safe, and now, now I'm in love with you, or whatever, and I still—I don't know what the hell is happening, dude, but I know that whenever I'm around you...people love you, Billy. And that's what you deserve.”

“You’re in love with me?” Billy echoes softly, and Steve shrugs.

“Or whatever.”

And then Billy has the audacity to snort, as if they’re not both crying, as if Steve hasn’t just confessed something important. “Jesus Christ, Harrington, it’s been a week and ONE kiss, you’ve really gotta get your shit together.”

“Yeah, I KNOW,” Steve snaps back, but he can’t help from grinning, too, and Billy’s face goes from a smirk to a full blown smile.

“Everything I was saying, Billy, I meant it. What happened wasn’t your fault. And- people should’ve been watching out for you, man. And people love you now, and...yeah. I just need to know that you believe any of that.”

Billy watches his face like he’s looking for something, eyes flickering back and forth. He runs his tongue over teeth, but Steve’s not even sure he’s conscious he’s doing it. After a moment, he nods curtly. “I know Max loves me,” he says tersely, “and I believe Joyce when she says it, and I believe you, too. And I know- I would never let Neil do this shit to Max, so I know- yeah. That’s all I can give you, right now.”

Steve nods back. It’s not enough—he wants Billy to believe all of it, he wants Billy to know he didn’t deserve any of this, that the Mind Flayer wasn’t his fault—but it’s a start, and he’ll spend the rest of his life teaching Billy to believe the rest of it, if he has to.

"I really want to kiss you right now," he confesses, and Billy says, "yeah, I want that, too."

This kiss is different than the last one—it's softer, it's easier, it's more sure. Steve loves him, he knows it.

After a second, Billy says, with his face half buried in Steve's neck: "We really need to go, I don't want- We gotta get back to Joyce."

"Yeah, yeah I know," Steve whispers, but all he wants to do is hold Billy, forever. "I'm really- I'm really sorry we had to leave Max, man." Billy makes an awful noise, and Steve's own breathes are ragged.

'You have to protect him,' Max had whispered in his ear right before they left. 'He has to have someone who cares about him being safe.' Steve knows that, though, and Steve's going to spend the rest of his life making sure Billy knows it, too.

xxx

When Joyce sees Billy and Steve pull back in the driveway, something unwinds in her chest, and it's all she can do not to cry.

They've all been frantically packing since the boys and Max left, and she's called her cousin and explained that, yes, they need to move NOW, not next week, please, and all of the kids are here, now, running around and shoving Will and El's things in boxes—poor El, she barely even had time to move in—and their voices just make it so much more obvious that Max ISN'T here, that Max should be here, that the kids are missing a part of themselves. And there have been tears on everyone's part and Nancy has somehow provided car loads of cardboard boxes, and when ever Nancy moves Joyce can see that she still has the pistol tucked into the back of her jean shorts. ("Why do you have a GUN?" Mike had screamed, and Nancy had screamed back "oh, GROW UP, Mike.") And in the chaos of it all, Will had looked at her, Will, her sweet, sweet Will, and said, when no one else was listening: "I'm glad we're leaving. I- I still get scared at night, here." And she'd hugged him and her heart had broken that all of her children are so scared and so traumatized and so, so good at the same time.

And when Steve and Billy pull back into the driveway, her heart breaks again with the same feeling, and all she can think is: they're home.

37. You're Driving

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: referenced abuse, non explicit sexual content

Even though I am the worst at replying to comments, please know that I appreciate them so much and I reread every comment every time I upload a chapter! I still can't believe that people are actually reading this, so reading your thoughts is incredible.

The house is in disarray, and Dustin actually hugs Steve, and mumbles: "me and Robin thought we'd never see you again," and Steve sees Billy flinch.

Joyce fills them in after kissing both their cheeks (When was the last time Steve's mom kissed him? Was he a child? Did she do it then?): they're moving out first thing in the morning, and Jonathan is staying behind, to help take care of the old house and sell it, and then he'll be there, too. She doesn't say anything about Steve, but she glances at him when she says they'll be able to move in to the new house without Jonathan's help, and Steve realizes that she knows, even if they haven't told her, that he's planning on coming. He wonders if it's written all over his face: he can't leave Billy, not now.

He does need to say goodbye though, really, and Dustin keeps looking at him but Steve can barely make eye contact without his throat closing up. He's already said goodbye, it's true, but it's one thing to do it when he's running away and Dustin's yelling at him and another to do it in a house where everyone's crying. He asks Dustin, quietly, when he thinks Billy isn't listening, if he'll call Robin and tell her to come, because Steve owes her a real goodbye, too; Robin, who two months ago was just a coworker and is now his best friend.

Billy keeps watching him, and Max's absence is acutely painful now, and the kids give Billy a wide berth, staring at home with wide eyes. Steve is so tired, and he wants to sleep, and he'll sleep in a bed with

Billy, he doesn't care if everyone knows. He's so sick of goodbyes.

xxx

Billy goes to bed a full two hours before Steve, but he doesn't sleep. He leaves Steve out on the porch with Robin and Dustin, because he can see the pain in Steve's eyes and it looks too much like saying goodbye to Max for Billy to stay. Brothers, Max had said, Steve and Dustin are like brothers now, and Max is Billy's sister, and now they're all saying goodbye and leaving, right when Billy had finally managed a semblance of a mental family tree. (Would his mom be proud? That he'd built a new family? Was he always supposed to do this, too? Or was she the only one who actually got to leave?)

Fragments of conversations from before bounce around now, from before the monsters, before the Byers, from back when Steve was just the face of all of Billy's competition. Things Tommy had told him like they were a joke, even though the anger behind the joke was real; insults Carol had sneered behind Steve and Nancy's backs, insults with a real weight to them. Steve had said he didn't know who Billy was, not really, and the truth is, Billy can't grasp Steve, either.

Billy can't help but feel that it's not fair, really, for Steve to be the way that he is. Steve, by nature, can be soft and kind and gentle and Billy feels like he has to fight, every minute, to be anything other than Neil. And Steve—there's no way to hate him for it, not anymore, not when Steve holds his face in his hands and kisses him on the nose and says he's in love with Billy and places his own body, so easily and thoughtlessly, between Billy and anything Billy's afraid of. But it feels...Billy wishes he could do it, too, for Steve. Wishes it was as easy for him to tell Steve how he feels, wishes it was as easy for him to hold Steve, wishes he could conduct himself in a way that was soft and kind and not angry or scared.

Steve's voice rattles around in his head—Billy's not Neil, he's not—but Billy can't help it; he knows the truth. Some people are born angry, and he's one of them. The least he can do, then, is make sure that anger is worth something.

Steve crawls into his bed once the house is quiet and everything is dark, and he can tell from the way that Steve collapses that he's still

tired. Billy sits up, looking down at him.

“Thought you were asleep,” Steve murmurs, and his face is swollen and blurry, a mixture of exhaustion and crying. Billy wonders, absentmindedly, if they’ll ever get to the point where they don’t have dark circles under their eyes.

Slowly, watching Steve the entire time for any sign, Billy moves over, straddling Steve as quietly as possible. Steve starts to sit up, and Billy places a hand on his chest and pushes him back to the bed, as gently as he can. Steve looks up at him with wide eyes, suddenly not as tired.

“Billy...”

Almost experimentally, still quiet, Billy slips a hand underneath the hem of Steve’s shirt, fingers over his hipbones, over his ribs, digging into the hair on his chest.

“This okay?” he asks, finally speaking, and Steve nods.

“Yes, Billy, I-“

He reaches up a hand to touch Billy’s face, and Billy shakes his head. Immediately, Steve drops his hand, and Billy’s heart pounds.

“Say it again.” Billy whispers. “What you said in the car.”

Steve hesitates, and then, catching on whispers back: “I’m in love with you, Billy.” Billy nods again, tries to control his heart rate, wonders how the hell it’s so easy for Steve to say that. He grasps the hem of Steve’s shirt, and, with a silent nod from Steve, pulls it off over Steve’s head in one movement, settling down so that some of his weight is resting on Steve and so that he can look at Steve, really look at him. Steve is perfect, he thinks, and it seems ridiculous to think that he’d ever thought to try to compete with Steve, that he’d ever thought he could be better or look better than him somehow.
“Say it again.”

“I’m in love with you,” Steve says, and he sounds so genuine, and so earnest, and Billy’s chest aches. He slides backwards, hands catching at the waistband of Steve’s pants, and Steve nods again, and, this

time, before he reaches a hand out, Steve whispers: “is this okay?” Billy nods, and Steve buries a hand in Billy’s hair, fingers entangled in the curls.

Fine, Billy thinks, right before he presses a kiss to Steve’s hipbone. Let Steve be good at all the stuff that matters. Let Steve be able to say I love you and able to be kind and able to be good.

Billy slides Steve’s pants down, grabs selfishly at Steve’s hips and Steve makes a muffled gasping noise. Let Steve be good at everything else. This? This is the part that Billy can be good at.

xxx

Billy and Steve used to see each other naked in the showers every single day. For some reason, that’s one of the only things Steve can focus on right now. Why the hell didn’t they ever take advantage of that?

xxx

Steve is as quiet as possible, and, at the end, Billy is feeling probably more self satisfied than he should.

When he’s finished, Steve whispers, “should we talk about that?” And Billy replies: “Can we just have this one thing that we don’t have to talk about today?” And Steve smiles and nods and rolls into him, his head tucked into Billy’s arm, and they lay like that, like it’s easy and normal, until Steve falls asleep.

After Steve falls asleep, Billy waits. He waits for at least an hour until he disentangles himself from Steve’s lanky body and walks down the hall, carefully avoiding any of the sleeping kids scattered around the house. He knocks on Jonathan’s bedroom door, once, twice, until Jonathan finally opens the door with bleary eyes, a slightly more awake Nancy sitting in the bed behind him.

“Nancy,” Billy says, aiming for a confidence he lost awhile ago, “you still got that gun?” He pauses, avoiding Jonathan’s gaping face, focusing everything on Nancy. “There’s an errand I need to run.”